

## **Why did I choose Gender Studies**

We had six interns from Gender studies from TISS and Ambedkar University joining us in June-July 2021. We asked them to write a self note on why did they chose Gender Studies. Here we have collated their notes.

### **Nayanshree:**

I was introduced to Gender Studies in the last year of my graduation. To take gender studies as a course for my Master's was a courageous and risky decision. There was no particular instance where I realised my interest in gender studies, rather it was in the collection of experiences where I questioned gender identities, watched some films, documentaries, interacted with people etc. The realisation to formally pursue this course came when I read some parts of Simone de Beavouir's The Second Sex and Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own. Though I did not completely understand the criticality behind those two books at that time, I was overwhelmed to see the layers of oppression that categorizes women as the 'other'. In the background of reading these texts were the Shaheen Bagh protests in Delhi, and the political environment of college spaces. The lockdown of coronavirus allowed me to see the gender and power relations in households that were invisible to me before, and this further pushed me towards the subject of gender studies.

It's been six months that I have been formally engaged in the course, and the journey till now has been immensely filled with moments where my opinions and beliefs have been challenged and completely shattered for which I am really grateful. With gender studies, I now try to look at processes that give rise to belief systems in society. With this course I have also come to realise that gender cannot only be looked from a particular feminist lens and we need to understand different standpoints and different disciplines in order to grapple with the subject.

### **Binduja:**

The reason that motivated me to consider gender studies as a discipline for my MA comes from all my personal experiences growing up as a girl, witnessing domestic abuse at home and feeling hopeless, powerless throughout. It also stems from my two years of experiences with women of an underprivileged community, noticing their everyday lives and failing to understand their subordination, violence they face, lack of space or support to voice these issues. All these experiences wanted me to get into a deeper academic understanding of feminism and what it stands for. Thus, when I was making a huge shift in my academic background from engineering, Gender studies seemed the right place to give a voice and understand the roots of everyday experiences of different people.

My first interaction with the word feminism was from the book "Living a Feminist life" by Sara Ahmed which examines the smallest of experiences from everyday life.

This book made me realize a lot of small things that I tend to ignore around me which are problematic and should be addressed.

**Kritika:**

I worked as a Journalist before enrolling in this course and have contributed a couple of articles on gender and social issues. I am passionate about the subject matter. Gender makes sense of the society we are living in and I think by applying a gender lens to our studies of society, one can have a better understanding of our social arrangements.

Gender Studies enable us to think critically. In order to read, write and research on gendered relationships, one has to be thoroughly invested in thinking about the issues critically. I wish to have a critical engagement with the gendered and social relationships to understand the making of power relations in society. I believe this course will help me in giving a nuanced understanding of social relations and will further help me in understanding how various contradictions like caste, class, labour, and sexuality place different genders differently.

As a girl child, growing up in a conservative Marwari family in Chhattisgarh, I have had many questions and thoughts on the gender-based discriminations that are still deemed natural or normal in my family. The stories that I hear from my mother about her disturbing experiences as a new 19-year-old bride in a joint family and how she faced a traumatic experience of the loss of her first child during delivery, made me think about the general romanticization of the ideas of marriage, childbirth, and motherhood in our society and the repercussions women face due to it.

When I moved to Delhi for a job as a Business Reporter in a national newspaper, I thought that this is where I would meet like-minded people, with whom I would feel free to discuss the things I care about. However, as a woman and journalist, I saw and faced sexism and gender-based discrimination that are prevalent in the media industry. During this time, I was also friends with a colleague who was accused in the #metoo movement. I saw how media organizations sideline the issues related to sexual harassment in the workplace. There were no gender sensitization programs for employees and interestingly, I observed how most of the top positions in media are filled with men. I started reading more news and articles from the perspective of gender during this time. Some of my colleagues even suggested good books on the subject matter. And this curiosity to learn more about gender made me quit my job to pursue this course at Ambedkar University.

**Rashad:**

My entry into the field of Gender studies came due to my experience in the campus of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Hyderabad. During the time I was pursuing

my Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences, student movements against the University administration and the government occupied by the BJP were a common phenomenon and all students part of the campus would engage in these protests on some level or the other. I have always been aware of my identity as a cis-het muslim man in the contemporary society and thus, resonated on a large scale with the movements criticising the Hindutva agenda of the BJP Government. However, it was only after partaking in the student movement of TISS Hyderabad that I became more aware of the different nuances that are present and that one could not limit their understanding to only their experiences and had to view society in totality and see how different identities engage with the state and society.

A constant presence which reminded the student collective to be mindful of the different intersectional identities that exist and to have an agenda which is centred towards the interest of the marginalised was the Women Studies Batch on our campus. An intersectional understanding which takes questions of caste, class, gender, and sexuality and does not exclude one for the sake of the other was what the Women Studies Batch always brought to each protest. It was through my engagement with them during the protests and then later as a friend, which helped shape most of my political understanding. I was inspired by them and that led me to pursue Gender Studies for my Masters. The aspect that stood out for me the most, which was constantly resonated by the Women Studies Batch, was the importance of self-reflexivity and the understanding of privilege. Both go hand in hand and are important in order to understand who dominates certain spaces and how that leads to the marginalisation of others.

I decided to pursue Gender Studies in order to build up on my understanding of society and utilise the concept of intersectionality to ensure that movements that I do take part in do not later become dominated by Upper-caste voices and can be facilitators to bring forth voices otherwise always have to fight to get their point across. Solidarity, which is crucial in movements, can only be achieved through an understanding of your fellow person and an empathy for their struggle. The one field in academia which pursues this is Gender Studies, albeit it might have issues within itself, there is space to criticise and be self-reflective.

### **Sukanya:**

As an adolescent and teenager, I did not consciously seek out feminist theory or feminist art forms but continued to carry many of the casteist, misogynist beliefs and opinions that had been ingrained into me through socialization from childhood. I believed in the notions of an 'ideal womanhood', had judgemental and dismissive opinions about women singers and actresses who were considered to be 'bold' or 'daring' and firmly believed that 'I am not like the other girls' because I did not spend much time thinking about fashion or makeup but liked sports instead.

However, I started to engage with feminism slowly through social media posts around the time I was 16 – particularly through tweets and posts from the networking site Tumblr. These posts filtered down to me and I started to relate my life experiences with the content of the posts. The posts discussed sexual violence, misogyny and

sexism in different spheres of life – all of which resonated with me at a certain level. While I did not agree with some of the posts, I did negotiate with them and tried to read up some more about the themes that the posts discussed. The ideas that I gathered were very basic, rudimentary and more importantly, incomplete. My feminist ideals were strengthened when I went to college and engaged with feminism in a more academic manner. In addition to that, participating in debate competitions with topics regarding feminism and women's movements also helped enrich my worldviews as I tried to think of different perspectives from which my teammates and I could approach unique themes related to reproduction, marriage, education and more.

My bachelor's degree was in Political Science with a variety of supplementary subjects ranging from Sociology to English literature and History. While studying my course materials for three years, the glaring lack of a gendered perspective and analysis for each of my papers and subjects became very clear. In fact, the "women's question" or the "gendered question" always came at the end as a forethought. It wasn't until we specifically had papers about gender studies or modules related to that we deeply delved into such questions.

From then onwards and after a year of studying Women's Studies, I have felt the need to engage in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies as subjects like economics, history, sociology cannot be read in isolation to the question of gender. While some may argue that inserting the question of gender forcefully may dilute the core subject and its concerns, looking at those materials from a unique perspective can only enrich our analysis and understanding.

Therefore, the choice to study Gender Studies was borne out of a desire to add a theoretical base to my feminist thoughts and opinions. It was also a choice that seemed the most fitting for encouraging my research interests.

### **Rajeev Anand:**

Gender Studies as an academic discipline has been a personal choice. As a young closeted queer person, I always envisioned figuring out my queer self when financially independent. After enrolling in Delhi University, I was heavily involved in student politics. This space of student politics was dominated by right-wing politics and always felt very masculine, dominant, and oppressive even though I was straight passing. I eventually came out to a friend who was in student politics, and he asked me to hide my identity. During this time, I was struggling with anxiety surrounding the same as I wasn't able to convey to others. There were also instances when people around me used to engage with homophobic jokes, and it hurt and angered me, especially as this happened during the ruling of the Supreme Court on Section 377 in 2018.

All this while, I was slowly becoming aware of power dynamics and gender roles that exist due to patriarchy. In my second semester of Sociology as a General Elective, we had the reading *Families we Choose* from Kath Weston, where we discussed gay and lesbian families. That was the first time I heard the terms *gay* and *lesbian* in a not

derogatory sense. It was surprising that these identities can have an academic discourse. During my schooling, there was no discussion around LGBTQIA+ identities. Only Science and Commerce were known to me as viable options to study.

I have had two papers in my undergraduate years that gave me a systematic understanding of the inequities in our societies and have inspired me to try to deconstruct and reconstruct certain norms. The paper on *Gender and Violence* introduced me to *Gendered Violence*, which is deeply rooted in patriarchy. I could see its prevalence in daily life too. It came off as a shock initially. However, after understanding the structures responsible for it, I could analyze it more constructively and understand how gender relations operate in our society and how violence is gendered. Beyond intellectual engagement, the paper enabled me to make sense of the ongoing happenings (the #metoo movement, for instance) around me.

Further, in the paper *Feminism: Theory and Practice*, evaluating Feminism from an interdisciplinary perspective and highlighting its subtleties as they cut across disciplines was instrumental in formulating my understanding of feminism. My undergraduate academic training has not only been an intellectually stimulating exercise but has also bridged the gap between theory and praxis. Discussions on nuanced and controversial topics have allowed me to assess arguments from multiple perspectives. The learning I have acquired throughout my undergrad has invigorated me to question internalized notions around gender discrimination while also challenging them. It has enhanced my role as an active citizen. The vast spectrum of topics ranging from but not limited to 'the Creation of Patriarchy' to the 'Feminist Critique of IR' to 'Women in Social Reform' has equipped me with perspectives that are not limited to the classroom and have positive spillovers. By bringing reality closer to academia, this feminist element in my course has been a part of my undergraduate academic experience.

My engagement in the Women's Development Cell, as a member and then as the General Secretary has allowed me to organize workshops and moderate weekly discussions on topics like *Sexual Harassment, Rape Culture, Abortion Rights, Trans Rights, Consent, Gender, and Disability* to organizing the first-ever Pride March in my college. The discussion on 'Sexual Harassment' helped me understand the power dynamics behind it, the concept of Patriarchy, and how it perpetuates sexual violence. The talk emphasized the need to deconstruct the status quo. Students were also informed about the ICC (Internal Complaint Committee), and it's working too. Through Pride, we were able to reach out to the students to make them aware of how transwoman Marsha P. Johnson was behind the very idea of Pride to the HIV-AIDS Movements and question of equal access to public health during the 1990s to the importance of an act of reclaiming the public space during Pride Marches. The discussion on *Consent* helped me in understanding how Consent goes beyond sexual acts.

During my undergraduate years, I was also involved in queer activism by performing and writing poetry on queer experiences. These experiences collectively and forging solidarities with other queer people allowed me to reflect upon my professional goals under the discipline of Gender Studies. As a Queer Bahujan person, I understood why intersectionality and articulating one's identity are so crucial. I chose to do an M.A. Women's Studies at TISS, Mumbai, for its multidisciplinary nature, the political space it provides for the organization and discussion, and quench my academic thirst for learning more.