'Missing' Women Leadership in Indian Higher Education: Broken Pipeline of Fields of Power?

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Abstract

This piece is an outcome of deliberations on the 'unanticipated' that I came across during the course of field work done recently for understanding the historical-institutional trajectories of state public universities in India. A comparative-institutional analysis, the resource sight to understand what makes for 'decline' in state public universities, and the reasons thereof. I observed in this process, that women are missing from leadership positions in Indian public universities. Barring all-women's universities, and the state of west Bengal, there is scarce contemporary evidence of women leading India's 903 public universities. So what I write has its origins in reflecting on the experience and life world of the public university, and an attempt to come to terms with this 'absence'. The 'missing' is accounted for by analytical engagement with the nature of institutional power of the academe--one that systematically excludes women from leadership positions, even as there is evidence of progressive feminisation at the bottom of the pipeline.

I understand the Indian public university along three axes: as an embodiment of ideas about universality, autonomy, and equality; as an embedded social actor in its relationship with other institutional actors, and as an agency enabling the capabilities of the least advantaged and marginalised. The arguments are stylised around three narratives: I examine at first the 'pipeline'--the hierarchy and its assumed natural progression-- with respect to women in higher education; analysis of a critical set of ideas being located in the university--the women's studies in the 1970s--a development that should have interrogated the institutional power of the university itself; and finally examining some critical junctures when women have, and have not advanced to becoming vice chancellors. The last is an explicit use of the comparative method to examine the scoping conditions under which women ascend to the top or not, and to understand the evolution of the public university as a field of 'power over' the marginalised.