doi:10.20896/g7bf2g29

LEGENDS OPEN ACCESS

Professor Saraswati Raju (1946-2026): A Pioneer Who Challenged Disciplinary Boundaries and Championed Gender in Geography

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Abstract

Professor Saraswati Raju, the Social Geographer who worked at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, was a trailblazer who had many pioneering achievements to her credit. Her intellectual contributions positioned her as a vanguard figure who was a fierce advocate of critical approaches to geographical scholarship. She played a pioneering role in shaping and developing the sub-field of gender geography in India and made the voices of women from the Global South heard in the global academic discourses. She was also the first non-Anglo-American scholar to be honoured with multiple prestigious awards by the Anglo-American academic community in recognition of her exceptional scholarly achievements. Professor Raju breathed her last on 10th November 2026. This article is a tribute to her professional journey, focusing on her publications, distinctions and enduring legacy.

Keywords: Professor Saraswati Raju; Gender Geography; Social Geography; Critical Geography; India

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Introduction

It was one of those regular academic exchanges that I used to have with my PhD supervisor, Professor Saraswati Raju, during the formative phase of my research, where I was enthusiastically engaged in a conversation with her on the concept of 'empowerment'. I vividly recall how, at that stage, I largely understood empowerment as acquiring skills, earning an independent income, attaining education and achieving economic independence. Trained in the quantitative scholarship traditions of the Centre for the Study of Regional Development (CSRD) at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), I was even trying to develop a quantitative scale to measure empowerment, assigning greater weightage to higher educational attainment and the acquisition of skills. To my complete surprise, Professor Raju gently asked me: "but why are you assuming that having a skill makes a woman empowered? You know, sometimes, not knowing a skill can also be empowering." To explain her point, she shared a story about her grandmother, who had never learned how to iron clothes. She argued that had she known how to iron, she would have had to do it alongside all the other chores. In a way, therefore, not knowing how to iron clothes actually reduced her burden to some extent. Through this simple example, Professor Raju coaxed me to think critically and introduced me to a different understanding of agency— that could rarely be found in books. She taught me to look beyond conventional indicators of empowerment and recognise the importance of choice and freedom in women's lives.

That was Professor Saraswati Raju, an independent and critical thinker, an unconventional mind, who was always ready to challenge received wisdom. Among the many conversations I had with her as my PhD supervisor, this particular discussion remains etched in my memory to this day. As a young girl in my early 20s, who dreamed of becoming an 'empowered woman' myself, little did I understand the depth and significance of her words at that time. It was only much later that I began to appreciate the wisdom, foresight, and lived experiences embedded in what she shared. These words and many more that she shared with me subsequently during our two-decade-long association shall remain an enduring part of my life's journey. On the morning of 10th November, 2026, Professor Saraswati Raju breathed her last and left for her heavenly abode. Figure 1 is a display of the social media profile of Professor Raju. With her passing, as the world grieved the loss of a pioneering scholar and an influential voice in shaping the geographies of the Global South, I found myself mourning the loss of a mentor whose influence on my own intellectual and personal journey went far beyond the realm of academia.

Early Life, Childhood and Education

Professor Saraswati Raju's life is a tale of unwavering courage, resilience and an enduring commitment, both in her personal and professional lives. Born on 22nd December 1946 in Nagpur, Maharashtra, into a joint family, she spent her early childhood in a relatively modest family environment. In 1958, at the age of twelve, she moved to Gwalior, a city that would subsequently become central to her educational and intellectual journey. She was the eldest among five siblings and quickly assumed responsibilities towards her younger sisters and brothers early in life. A few pictures of her with her family are shown in Figure 2. In fact, her role within the family reflected a deep sense of responsibility, affection, and commitment to the well-being of those around her. This, probably, later on came to define her relationships with her students, colleagues and the wider academic community. She studied in the Government Girls' School, Morar, Gwalior, where she completed her schooling in 1963. Her childhood was, by her own standards, rather ordinary. She was never among the toppers, usually securing the 15th to 20th positions in a class of approximately 20–25 students. A significant transformation began when she reached the Xth and XIth standards. During this period, she gradually became more inclined towards academics. She subsequently pursued her

Bachelor's at Maharani Laxmi Bai Arts and Commerce College, Gwalior, under Jiwaji University. In 1971, she completed her Masters in Geography from Jiwaji University with a Gold Medal for topping the Faculty of Social Sciences. She completed her PhD in 1977 and began teaching in a college. The girl who had once considered herself an ordinary student would eventually emerge as one of the most distinguished academic achievers of her university, receiving Gold Medals in both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees.[1] What makes her educational journey truly extraordinary is the distance she travelled intellectually—from being a nondescript school student to a distinguished scholar of international repute. Her life stands as a testament to the transformative power of perseverance, intellectual curiosity, and an unwavering commitment to knowledge. In 1978, she went to the USA with the Indian Government National Fellowship for Social Sciences, Studies Abroad for Post-doctoral Research and began her work under the mentorship of Professor David Sopher at Syracuse University. There she served as the editor of the university students' magazine, becoming its first editor who was not a native English speaker. This achievement reflected her intellectual acumen, linguistic competence and ability to establish herself within global academia. According to the views she expressed in several personal conversations and interviews, her real academic journey began during her postdoctoral research, as she was introduced to the Anglo-American perspectives in Human Geography, although she never failed to resist and question the Western categories while looking at the geographies of the Global South. Throughout her career, she relentlessly challenged disciplinary orthodoxies—both epistemological and methodological.



Figure 1: Professor Saraswati Raju (1946-2026)
Source: Social Media Profile of Professor Raju

[1] Source: Personal communication with Gopal Krishna Murti, the younger brother of Professor Saraswati Raju



Figure 2: Family Photographs
Source: Personal Family Album Collections

Career at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University

After completing her post-doctoral research (1978-1981), she chose to return to India, driven by a deeper intellectual commitment to studying women's roles in South Asia. This decision reflected not merely a professional choice but also her conviction that scholarship must remain connected to the society it seeks to understand. She joined the Centre for the Study of Regional Development (CSRD), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, on 01/04/1982 as a Professor of Social Geography. Although often acclaimed as a feminist geographer in the Indian as well as the global academic communities, Professor Raju seldom called herself one. She often referred to herself as a social geographer who devoted herself to expounding the gender-based marginalities and exclusions across scales. In several personal communications and interviews, she always reiterated that she never wanted to be known as a feminist geographer. Perhaps this is because of the fact that feminist scholarship has historically tended to foreground women's experiences, concerns and struggles. Professor Raju was an ardent supporter of addressing and involving men in the struggle for gender justice. Gender, not women, was at the

heart of her scholarship. In addition to gender, her academic interests spanned many more fields, including labour studies, literacy and education, regional development and so forth. At CSRD, she served as the Chairperson from 2005-2007 and was also the Coordinator for the Centre for Advanced Studies (a status accorded to CSRD). She was also the Honorary Director of the Women's Studies Programme at JNU from 2008-2011. She was superannuated on 31/12/2011. At CSRD, she supervised more than 35 M.Phil. and PhD scholars.

Research and Publications

She began her intellectual pursuit of locating gender within geography at a time when gender was not even recognised as a distinct intersectional category that influences lived realities even within Social Geography. Although it is practically impossible, indeed beyond the scope of this tribute, to present a repertoire of her celebrated works, mention may be made here of a few distinguished publications that include the edited volumes titled *Women and Work in South Asia: Regional Patterns and Perspectives* in 1993 (with Deipica Bagchi); *Colonial and Post-Colonial Geographies of India* and co-authored volume titled *Men as Supportive Partners in Reproductive Health: Moving from Rhetoric to Reality* in 2000 (with Ann Leonard)— a book that signifies her standpoint that men as much as women are important in advancing gender justice. A particularly landmark work of hers is the *Atlas of Women and Men in India* published in 1999 (with N. Kumar, Janet Townsend and Peter Atkins)— which remains a pioneering and unique attempt to bring Census data in conversation with interpretive theorisation of region, gender and space. Indeed, the weaving together of empirics with theory has always been a major strength of her work, quite contrary to the colonial praxis of exploring, charting, surveying and mapping that predominated the discipline back in those days. A summary of her publications is presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3. However, her whole list of publications has been compiled and presented as a bibliography.[2]

Table 1: Books Published by Professor Saraswati Raju

Sl. No.		Single	Co-Authored/Co-Edited
1	Edited	1	4
2	Authored	-	2

Table 2: Total Papers Published by Thematic Areas

Sl. No.	Broad theme	Journal Articles	Book Chapters
1	Unbalanced sex ratio	6	-
2	Female literacy and education	4	1
3	Women, work and labour market	9	5
4	Women, society and development issues	4	6
5	Empowerment, agency	3	2
6	Gender, space and geography	3	7
7	Critical theory	6	2

While her research interests in the formative years addressed gender inequalities in the labour market, literacy, education and sex ratio, gradually her work began explicitly underscoring critical geographical praxis. In her 2004 article titled *Contextualizing Critical Geography in India: Emerging Research and Praxis*, she resolutely critiqued the descriptive approach in the discipline as a shadow of its colonial legacy and how critical geographers were often not

[2] The information related to the publications, awards and honours received by Professor Saraswati Raju is based on her detailed CV taken from different websites. The list may not be exhaustive because it was not possible to obtain up-to-date information, despite our best efforts, due to her illness.

considered as 'real geographers'. She expressed deep concerns about the contradictions in contemporary development discourses and emphasised that critical geographers must delve into these diverse formulations and develop a distinctive theoretical identity of their own.

Table 3: Other Publications

Sl. No.	Broad theme	Discussion Paper	Commissioned Report
1	Unbalanced sex ratio	-	1
2	Female literacy and education	-	3
3	Women, work and labour market	2	1
4	Women, society and development issues	1	1
5	Empowerment, agency	-	1

She also proactively started articulating the gender lens in geography. Her celebrated publications in this context were: *Doing Gender, Doing Geography*: *Emerging Research in India* in 2011 (with Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt), *Gendered Geographies: Space and Place in South Asia* in 2011 and *Women Workers in Urban India* in 2016 (with Santosh Jantrana). The remarkable corpus of her scholarly contributions typically raised unsettling questions that challenged conventional stereotypical concepts such as the taken-for-granted association between employment, income generation and women's empowerment; women's vis-à-vis men's role in attaining gender equality; problematised the categorisation of space into public-private binaries and so forth.

It is her unconventional and critically reflective insights that lead her to emerge as a distinguished voice among geographers from the Global South. In her celebrated piece *We Are Different but Can We Talk*, she terms the hermeneutical approach to understanding individualised and situated experiences of women as "an academic luxury that we from the "Third World" cannot afford. (Raju, 2002: p.173). Instead, she argued for a "critical overhauling of our research tools, for caution, and for a healthy scepticism about issues related to representation. She was of the opinion that while differences do exist among the women in terms of, say, caste, class, ethnicity, religion and so forth; "individually positioned women can still belong to an overarching context, and that despite their differences, there may exist a common bond/alliance amongst women" (Raju, 2002: p.177). Thus, though she acknowledged the significance of social and regional intersectionalities in shaping our perceptions and lived realities — "I am a South Indian woman in North India, so the way I understand North Indian geographies would be different from that of a North Indian woman" as she used to repeatedly say; Professor Raju was also an advocate of a context-sensitive approach that recognises structural inequalities, alliances and collaborations. Her various projects, consultancies and project evaluations are narrated in Table 4.

She encouraged methodological flexibility, recognising that the choice of methods should be guided by the nature of the research problem rather than adherence to predetermined conventions. On the one hand, she did draw on large-scale and empirical data for theorising gender in geography, a practice that was not much appreciated by the western/northern feminist geographical scholarship; on the other hand, she also encouraged the use of diverse qualitative methods. In her 2014 article titled *Research Methodologies: An Exciting Mixed Bag*! published in *Space and Culture, India*, the special edition on methodology she edited, she enthusiastically lauds the use of images, texts, photographic representations, etc. and the use of multimodal technologies, including smartphones, cameras, online platforms, and social networking sites, as sources of data, noting that such diverse methodologies actually expand the realm of epistemological possibilities.

Table 4: Projects, Consultancies and Project Evaluations			
SL. No.	**Year**	**Commissioning Agency**	**Titles/ Details**
1	**2012-2015***	**Department of Science and Technology**	**Gender Atlas of India (with Professor Sucharita Sen and Professor Bhaswati Das)**
2	**2003**	**International Labour Organisation (ILO)**	**Evaluation of ILO- International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)- an intervention on the withdrawal of child labour and transitioning to schools**
3	**2003**	**UNFPA and Ministry of Health. GoI**	**Bringing Men in Reproductive and Child Health**
4	**2003**	**UNFPA**	**Documentation of UNFPA Country Programs with Adolescents in India**
5	**2001**	**UNFPA**	**Gender Impact Assessment of Haryana Integrated Women Empowerment and Development Programme.**
6	**1997-2000**	**Population Council, New Delhi**	**MacArthur Foundation sponsored project on Gender and Reproductive Health**
7	**1993**	**UNDP/UNIFEM**	**Macro Economic Management and Training, Cambodia.**
8	**1993**	**UNDP/UNIFEM**	**Gender-sensitive Tabulation of data for the project titled 'Gender-responsive Development Statistics in Laos' generated through the Laos Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS), Social Indicator Survey, the MCH Survey and the Urban Labour Survey undertaken by the Department of Statistics, Ministry of Labour in Laos.**

*** It received extensions twice and was finally submitted in 2017**

Achievements, Awards and Distinctions

Throughout her illustrious career, she received many awards and fellowships. She was the recipient of the Janet Monk Service Award (2010) given by the Women Speciality Group of the Association of American Geographers for exemplary contribution to the study of gender/feminist concerns in geography. She was the first to have received this award outside the Anglophone world. She has also been awarded the Distinguished Service Award for Asian Geography, instituted by the Asian Geography Speciality Group, Association of American Geographers. USA in 2012. This award honours outstanding scholars in the field of Asian geography who have demonstrated exceptional scholarship as well as service to the speciality group. In 2013, she received the fellowship under the *Thinker in Residence Program* at the Alfred Deakin Research Institute (ADRI), Deakin University, Geelong Campus (Table 5).

Her contributions to the development of gender geography in India are profound. She was the founding member of the Gender and Geography Commission in the International Geographical Union (IGU). She joined the Taskforce of Geographies of Gender in 1986. She started the first-ever network of Geographers working on gender in India through the newsletter *Arena* in 1989-1990. She was also instrumental in organising the first ever session on Geographies of Gender in the Annual Conference of the

National Association of Geographers (NAGI) in 1992. Her intellectual contributions placed her in important national and international academic engagements. She travelled extensively, undertaking assignments both within India and under the aegis of the United Nations, thereby engaging with diverse geographical, social and developmental contexts. She was also on the Editorial Boards of *Antipode, UK*; *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, USA; Geoforum, UK; Geography Compass; Progress in Human Geography (ex-member); Social and Cultural Geography; Indian Journal of Gender Studies; Space and Culture, India, among others.*

Table 5: Awards and Distinctions Received

Sl No.	Year	Landmarks and distinctions
1	2013	Fellowship under the 'Thinker in Residence Program' at the Alfred Deakin Research Institute (ADRI), Deakin University, Geelong Campus
2	2012	The Asian Geography Specialty Group Service Award in recognition of outstanding contributions to the research and teaching of Asian geography, Association of American Geographers, 2012, New York, NY, USA.
3	2010	Janet Monk Service Award by the American Association of Geographers, USA in recognition of an outstanding service contribution to women in geography and/or feminist geography - first ever outside the Anglo-Saxon World
4	2007	Vice Chancellor's Visiting Award for Distinguished Professors, Australian National University, Canberra
5	2005	First Visiting Scholar in Feminist Perspectives on Globalization, The Canadian International Development Agency- International Development Research Centre- Carleton University-University of Ottawa, Canada sponsored by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
6	2001	Visiting Guest Professor, Department of Geography and South Asian Institute, Ruprecht-Karls University, Heidelberg, Germany
7	1992	Trevelyan Fellowship at the Durham University, Durham, England
8	1978-81	Indian Government National Fellowship for Social Sciences, Studies Abroad for Post-doctoral Research
9	1973-76	University Grants Commission, India's Scholarship for Post- Doctoral Research
10	1971	Gold Medal, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, India for topping the list of successful candidates in the Master of Arts, Faculty of Social Sciences

An Enduring Legacy That Transcends Time

Professor Saraswati Raju's scholarship was distinguished by her intellectual depth, critical sensitivity, and commitment to understanding the lived realities of women and men. Her life is not simply a story of academic distinction or professional success. It is a testament to the possibilities that unfold when curiosity, determination and intellectual commitment come together. Her passing leaves an immense void in the academic community, particularly among those working in gender and feminist geography. She will always be remembered not only for her scholarship but also for her resilience in steadfastly negotiating with the androcentric biases of the discipline on the one hand and structural institutional barriers on the other hand. "In Research – you do what you want to do, and teach whatever others want you to teach. That's the way I did it," as she observed

in one of her interviews.[3] May her legacy continue to inspire us, and may her contributions to Indian geography be remembered for generations to come.

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Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges sincere gratitude towards Sri Gopal Krishna Murti and Dr. Sarmishtha Saha for their immense contributions in collating information about Professor Saraswati Raju. Thanks are also due to Ms. Surmi Banerjee for assisting in preparing this tribute.