

#MeToo Is A Crucial Moment to Revisit the History of Indian Feminism

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In the wake of #MeToo, the time is ripe to revisit the history of Indian feminism, in particular the idea of “waves.” Throughout this history, we see how Indian feminism has emerged as an object of internal contestation, with disputes about issues becoming grounds to question and redefine feminism itself.

Feminism in India is newly relevant. The past month has seen an explosion of online testimony to sexual harassment, in a watershed moment in India’s #MeToo movement. The beginnings of the latter can be traced to a list of sexual predators in the academy that circulated online in 2017 and produced a range of responses, but little by way of actual redressal of harm. In its current iteration, there have been major repercussions in the media and entertainment industry where named sexual offenders have faced losses that were social, even if not legal. The resignation of a union minister in the wake of multiple charges of sexual harassment was a concrete victory for the movement. Not since the gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student in New Delhi at the end of 2012, has India

witnessed such a surge of mainstream concern with sexual violence, rape culture, and patriarchy.

At the same time (and as with the previous one in 2012), the current moment has laid bare deep disagreements and divides amongst feminist voices and publics, revealing, in turn, the contested nature of Indian feminism itself. If, for some, feminism is about legal redress and due process, for others, it requires an extrajudicial set of interventions given the repeated limits and failures of the law to bring gender justice. For some others, it is ultimately the voices of middle class and metropolitan women, journalists, actors, and other professionals that constitute the “me” in India’s #MeToo. When, they ask, will the struggle be an intersectional one rooted in the multiple vulnerabilities faced by most Indian women?^[1]

Here, the Indian case is evocative of a more general and global predicament that contemporary feminism seems to find itself in. Across the north and the south, there is a new visibility, potency, and legitimacy to feminist knowledges, affects, and struggles, but there is also an intensification of internal contestation, charge, and conflict. If feminists are unable to respond in a unified voice to sexual violence, then they are also faced with an increased backlash from patriarchal forces, not to mention the threat of “co-option” from external agents, such as the state, the market, neo-liberal capitalism, and right-wing nationalisms (Farris and Rottenberg 2017). In short, whether in India or elsewhere, this is a conjuncture in which feminism and ideals of gender equality enjoy more widespread legitimacy than ever before, but paradoxically, at the same time, the fundamental contradictions of feminism as a political project have also never been more visible and obvious.

Origins of Indian Feminism

One might already discern a generational undertone in my telling of the story of feminism in India. Indeed, as in the West, this story is told in a decade-specific manner or as occurring in “waves of change.” And, even as we might employ the tripartite division of first, second and third wave, we need to be aware of the implications of employing such generationally inflected narratives, what they might leave out, and what the dangers are of a single story (Adichie 2009).

The anti-colonial and reform movements of the 19th century remain foundational to feminist politics in the region, constituting, for some, the first wave of Indian feminist organising. While this was a remarkable period for women’s rights and Indian women in general—effecting far-reaching changes to women’s education, employability, political participation, development, and “modernisation”—it was also instrumental in attaching the “women’s question” to nationalism (Chatterjee 1989; Sarkar 2001). Thus, even as middle-class Indian women modernised, becoming “new women” of the nation-in-making, their primary affiliation was meant to be to the family, the private sphere, the purity of nation and “culture.” Well into the postcolonial period, feminists drew on a culturally specific and

nationalist repertoire of Indian womanhood to reinforce their anti-Western and indigenous credentials.

The autonomous feminists of the 1970s and 1980s—educated, middle class (if not elite), and urban—worked solidly on recognisable constituencies of poor, grass-roots women, with the nation state as their main point of address (John 1999). They shifted the left-led focus on women’s “practical” gender interests around material inequality (and the subsuming of gender under class) to more “strategic” gender interests such as violence against women. The custodial rape of a 14-year-old Adivasi woman named Mathura epitomised, for these feminists, the manner in which sexual violence could not be separated from the logic and workings of the patriarchal state. The Mathura rape case was also significant for inaugurating a slew of successful legal reforms around violence against women and orienting Indian feminism itself towards legal strategies (Kapur 2005).

Even as the autonomous women’s groups of the 1970s–80s constituted a very small percentage of the Indian women’s movement (IWM), they gave it its most abiding legacy, especially in the qualities of radicalism and autonomy that have become normative to feminism as such. Even after the demise of these groups, autonomy, from both political parties and external donors, remained a cherished political ideal and goal amongst Indian feminists (Roy 2011). Beyond that, the 1970s have come to mark a point of origin for the post-independence IWM as a whole, given the public nature of feminist protest action during this period, as well as its success in effecting actual legal change. Even the 2012 anti-rape protests were compared to (and judged as falling short of) this golden age of activism (Tellis 2012).

Liberalisation and Indian Feminism in the 1990s

If the 1970s mark the beginning of the IWM, then the 1990s constitute a “turning point” (Tharu and Niranjana 1994). This was the decade of the opening up of the Indian economy and the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms. Economic liberalisation not only had far-reaching political and social effects, but also had at least two significant consequences for the IWM. The first of these was the rise of state feminism. Feminists came to be directly implicated in the expansion of state logic and governance, through effecting legal reform, in government-initiated women’s development programmes (such as Mahila Samakhya), women’s commissions (the National Commission for Women set up in 1990), and reservations in panchayats. Yet, the mood among Indian feminists was far from congratulatory, with Menon (2009) suggesting that state feminism could domesticate gender even as it opened up unexpected possibilities for women to participate in public political life.

Concerns around the implications of state feminism were most evident in legal reforms to combat violence against women. Besides the fact that very little was achieved in the realm of law enforcement, feminists argued that such reforms inadvertently increased the power

of the state, while reinforcing not just patriarchal, but also class-caste norms and normativities. Take, for example, the case of Bhanwari Devi, a poor rural development worker, who was gang-raped by five upper-caste men in a village in Rajasthan for daring to contest the practice of child marriage in 1992 (Pandey 2017). A lower court acquitted the men, citing age and caste differences between the accused and the victim. Even as this case was instrumental in formulating guidelines for sexual harassment at the workplace, Bhanwari Devi is yet to receive justice. More recent instances of legal reform, namely the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 that followed the 2012 gang rape, have also done little to stop the relentless war on women's bodies. This was more than evident in the case of the eight-year-old girl in Kathua, where sexual violence was employed to terrorise an entire community of nomadic Muslims in the Kashmir valley (BBC 2018).

Together with state feminism, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and "NGOisation" emerged as a second area of concern in the 1990s. A majority of the autonomous women's groups that were formed in the 1980s transformed into funded NGOs in this period, given the expansion of work and need for sustainability. It was, moreover, the NGOs with full-time professional or trained "staff" and not grass-roots political organisations, that were seen to be taking important decisions on behalf of the entire women's movement. While the first national-level autonomous women's conferences in the country were attended by autonomous feminist groups, by the time of the last conference in Kolkata in 2006, it was overrun by NGOs, suggesting that "the women's movement is a hugely funded affair today" (Biswas 2006).

The NGOisation of feminism evoked, in the Indian context, anxieties similar to those that have been documented elsewhere (Roy 2015). While a majority of these had to do with the sacrifice of political autonomy to external and especially global funding imperatives (NGOisation and transnationalisation have been twin processes), others had to do with changes to the internal culture and functioning of feminist struggles, as moving away from mass-based ones to professionalised and bureaucratised modes of engagement. These anxieties spoke to larger concerns about the neo-liberal turn in development centred on releasing the hidden entrepreneurial capacity of poor women of the global South as the answer to systemic issues of poverty and underdevelopment.^[2] The fact that women's groups were now part and parcel of such a neo-liberal, market-oriented, and professionalised development sector led to allegations of "9-5 feminists."

One consequence of this critique was the manner in which contemporary feminist formations like NGOs were not evaluated on their own terms, but for their failure to live up to the past, idealised standards. It is fair to say, instead, that there is great diversity in NGO practice, including their emergence as a major source of employment for lower middle-class women as well as their promotion of issues that earlier women's groups never touched, such as female sexuality (Roy 2011; 2015).

The 1990s also saw a fracturing of the nationalist framing of the women's question in the

face of internal critiques by minority feminists. After all, this was a decade of deepening caste- and religion-based cleavages in India, especially through the rise of an aggressive Hindu nationalism as well as caste-based politics; factors that have irrevocably changed the nature of Indian politics (Ray and Katzenstein 2005). In the face of such complex identity politics, the existence of the IWM as a singular, cohesive entity was questioned, as was its claim and ability to speak on the behalf of all women (Menon 2012). This period also saw the remaking of feminist practice in concrete material terms via, for instance, the establishment of a distinctly Dalit feminist position with its own “autonomous” political platforms, such as the National Federation of Dalit Women (Rege 1998). While, for some, such internal critiques of feminism heralded its fracturing and possible death, for others it paved the way for a more intersectional and self-reflexive feminist politics and practice (Sen 2014).

New Feminisms

The 2000s signified a new visibility and direction for Indian feminist activism, a third wave if you want. At the start of the decade, there were a number of spontaneous public protests and vigils led by middle-class youth in urban areas in response to high-profile cases of violence against elite women. An example is that of protests against the murder of model Jessica Lal (Dutta and Sircar 2013). There were also campaigns with explicit feminist agendas, like an Indian version of the international SlutWalk marches in 2011, and the 2009 Pink Chaddi campaign, which encouraged Indian women to mail underwear to members of a right-wing group that had attacked women drinking in a bar for being “un-Indian.” These two events were important forerunners of new feminist interventions into issues of public safety, street sexual harassment, and wider rape culture (epitomised by the anti-rape protests of 2012).

Rather than wait for state authorities to make Indian cities safer for women, new city-based feminist campaigns encouraged women to claim public spaces by and for themselves. They emphasised women’s desires for unconditional freedom in the public domain, including the freedom to access and occupy public spaces without fear, and even to indulge in “risky” behavior like “loitering” (Phadke et al 2011). Alongside local and national feminist campaigns like Why Loiter?, Blank Noise, Take Back the Night Kolkata, and Pinjra Tod, urban women challenged the stigma of menstruation, fought to enter Hindu temples, and broke taboos around speaking out on rape and rape culture.^[3]

The primarily middle-class and metropolitan character of these movements influenced both the kinds of issues they were taking up, as well as how they were choosing to do so (via social media). While activists in the IWM had always been middle class, the anti-colonial and socialist roots of the movement meant that class was privileged over all other social variables. By contrast, new feminists were unapologetically mobilising around issues that had particular relevance to them, but they also argued that addressing these issues would have wider implications across class. Their activism seemed to emerge out of and respond to the deficiencies of the feminism that came before them such as a legal feminism focused on

women's victimology alone (Kapur 2005).

The "third wave" also emerged in a time and place of neo-liberalism, enabled by its specific material configurations such as the growing activist use of social media, transnational links with feminist struggles elsewhere, increased education and employment options for women, and rising right-wing efforts to curtail these new freedoms, mobilities, and opportunities. Economic liberalism created, in other words, spaces for Indian women to politically intervene in ways that might not have been possible for previous generations.

For some critics, "new feminisms" were problematic for these very reasons. They were seen to embody and reflect the consumer-oriented, individualistic, and entrepreneurial dispositions of metropolitan middle-class Indian women; in short, "neo-liberal feminism" (Gupta 2016; Gilbertson 2018).^[4] Their mainly middle-class composition and their over-reliance on social media as an activist tool also raised concerns of exclusivity and limited reach besides inviting accusations of elitism and Westernisation.

For younger feminists who were part of the SlutWalk, such criticisms were perceived as less to do with elitism or Westernisation than with deep-seated anxieties around the public expression of sexuality (Borah and Nandi 2012). Pink Chaddi and SlutWalk campaigns, according to Borah and Nandi, centred questions of women's sexual agency, pleasure, and desire in ways that mainstream Indian feminism never had. Generational divides thus intensified in the third wave and in ways that produced monolithic accounts of contemporary feminisms (as being elitist) as well as those preceding them (as being anti-sex).

A Hall of Shame

Towards the end of 2017, the Indian feminist community was riveted by an unexpected and ferocious controversy, following on the heels of the global #MeToo movement that brought these generational conflicts to a head. Raya Sarkar, a graduate student of Indian descent at the University of California, Davis, published (on Facebook) a "list" (hereafter the List) of sexual predators in Indian academia. The cautionary list contained, in the first instance, 60 prominent male academics, located in premier Indian institutions as well as in North America. No context, incidents, details or explanation of crimes were provided. The "public secret" (Baxi 2014) of sexual harassment in the academy exploded in the creation of this digital archive—a hall of shame.

As the List gained traction on social media, a statement was issued by 12 established Indian feminists on the popular political blog, Kafila. It expressed deep discomfort with the act of anonymously naming men as sexual aggressors "with no context or explanation," and even argued that this could "delegitimise the long struggle against sexual harassment, and make our tasks as feminists more difficult" (Menon 2017). It asked for this initiative to be withdrawn while emphasising the importance of "due process, which is just and fair." Many

felt this was a particularly ironic call, given that an Indian court of law had only recently acquitted a well-known Indian writer and filmmaker who had been convicted of raping an American research scholar. The woman's "no" to oral sex was converted, by the judge, into a "feeble no," or, into consensual sex (Safi 2017).

What followed was a veritable split within the feminist community and one that appeared to be along generational lines. Younger feminists were positioned as ungrateful daughters vis-à-vis a feminist vanguard that had paved the way for them and older feminists, as naïve, if not reactionary, in their belief in due process and the law. What started as a generational debate, however, rapidly became one about caste-based differences and hierarchies. Just as it emerged that Sarkar was Dalit, the signatories of the statement on Kafila were identified as Savarna or upper-caste feminists. While the upper-caste politics of metropolitan feminists of the 1990s was called out, these internal differences reached a critical point in this controversy, with Dalit Bahujan feminists accusing upper-caste feminists of subjugating their efforts.

With the List, Dalit Bahujan Adivasi feminists decentered Savarna feminists, and disrupted, perhaps for the first time, nationalist framings of Indian feminism by revealing a vast terrain of multiple contestations and power relations. Rejecting their description as "millennial feminists," minority activists framed the controversy around the List in terms of the power imbalances between Savarna and Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi feminists. They made evident that contestations around caste cannot be understood in generational terms alone; they had persisted over time and within every generation of Indian feminists. By placing the voices of minority feminists, many of whom were also "younger" feminists, into the mainstream, the List also nuanced the overdominance of middle-class and upper-caste voices in Indian feminism's "third wave." In all these ways, Dalit Bahujan feminists disrupted conventional genealogies of Indian feminism.

Conclusions

Feminism in India has emerged as a subject of contestation, with many asking at several junctures: What is feminism? Who gets to define it, speak on its behalf? Who does it belong to? What is its proper place? Contestations about sexual violence, for example, have invariably become contestations about feminism. These moments are deeply pedagogical in the sense that they teach us how feminism is thought and made sense of, and how there are multiple, competing and even conflictual stories about feminism, and that too, from within its own fold. Such forms of internal critique and contestation are often concealed, if not flattened out, in generational narratives that tend to fix our gaze on differences across time, but not on the problematics of our present. Framed in generational terms, the present is marked by feminist loss, even failure, such as the failures of legal feminisms to provide gender-based justice and the failure of upper-caste Indian feminists to centre the politics of caste (thereby reproducing Brahminical supremacy). Framed in other ways, we could see such moments of feminist failing as pregnant with several possibilities, including greater

self-reflexivity, appreciation of hybrid legacies, and the propelling of “Indian feminism” into new directions.

End Notes:

[1] See, for example, <https://www.facebook.com/dalitwomenfight/>.

[2] Such assumptions underpin the popularity of developmental tools like microfinance, presumed to be a “magic bullet” when it comes to poverty reduction (Kabeer 2005).

[3] In 2013, Suzette Jordan emerged a feminist icon by refusing to hide behind the anonymous label of the “Park Street rape victim.” Jordan was gang-raped in Kolkata, and was labeled a liar and a prostitute by various politicians, including the state’s chief minister. She reportedly retorted: “How dare they call me a prostitute? Even if I were one, should I get raped? A prostitute earns for her family. She is not standing there for you to rape her.”

[4] This kind of “neo-liberal feminism” is a familiar one in the Anglo-American context where it is associated with the capacity to consume and be middle class (Rottenberg 2014; Farris and Rottenberg 2017).

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