# MEN AND FEMINISM IN INDIA

Edited by
Romit Chowdhury and Zaid Al Baset

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The relationship between men and feminism is frequently assumed to be antagonistic. This volume confronts this assumption by bringing critical attention to men's engagement in feminist research, pedagogy, and activism in India. The chapters in this collection respond to two broad thematic concerns: theoretical implications of men producing feminist knowledge and the history of men's participation in feminist endeavours. The volume also explores the undocumented contributions of men to three domains of feminist activity: institutionalization of feminism in the academy, social movements aimed at gender justice, and male writings on gender and sexuality.

Delving into an important yet overlooked aspect of the social sciences, this volume will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of gender studies, masculinity studies, modern Indian history, sociology, and social anthropology.

**Romit Chowdhury** is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. His research interests are in feminist studies, urban sociology, ethnography, and cultural studies. He has published on masculinity in the contexts of men's rights movements, feminist methodology, urban sociability, male feminism, sexual violence, and care-giving. He held a visiting position at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, for three months in 2016.

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"*Men and Feminism in India* represents a timely and necessary intellectual intervention. These essays – written from spaces of deep interdisciplinarity – collectively move the study of gender in India in radically new and refreshing directions."

—*Davesh Soneji, University of Pennsylvania*

"This book, gathering established and fresh voices into careful discussion of Indian menfolk's engagements with feminist (and queer) spaces, will quickly become an essential reference-point."

—*Caroline Osella, School of Oriental and African Studies, London*

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# Acknowledgements

In many ways, what has defined the contours of this edited volume is friendship. In 2013, the editors of this volume – two friends who shared a commitment to feminism – decided to collaborate on a project on what this commitment entails. As students and teachers of feminism we were both made aware that men's alliance with feminism was variously suspicious, surprising, and welcome. In other words, there was always something about men's relationship to feminism that needed explication, could not be taken for granted.

As a first step towards this book project, we invited feminist scholars to participate in a conference to help us unravel the many threads of men's pro-feminism in India. We remain grateful to and still a little surprised by the enthusiasm shown by senior scholars, both women and men, who agreed to participate in a conference helmed by two doctoral students. It was the trust of our teachers at Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC), particularly Tapati Guha Thakurta, that enabled us to organize and receive funding (from Indian Council of Social Science Research) for a conference titled 'Loyal Interlopers? Men Doing Feminism in India'. CSSSC, Kolkata, provided the venue for this meeting on 16–17 December 2014. In this we were assisted by a working committee comprising Anirban Das, Kiran Keshavamurthy, and Trina Nileena Banerjee. We would also like to thank Sreeparna Das and Ranjana Dasgupta for managing the logistics of the conference. Without their efforts, the conference would not have happened.

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Romit Chowdhury and Zaid Al Baset
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# Introduction

## Men and feminism in India

*Romit Chowdhury and Zaid Al Baset*

A *Huffington Post* article by a well-known feminist writer exclaims, 'Feminism: The Men Arrive! (Hooray! Uh-Oh!)'. A post on the e-magazine *Everyday Feminism* cautions its readers 'Beware These 10 Types of Feminist Men'. A recent *Buzzfeed* contribution lists '11 Simple Things Men Can Do For Feminism'. "Men, if you really think you're a feminist here's what to do when a woman says you're being sexist," advises an *Independent* article. A write-up on the digital platform *Feminism in India* reminds its followers "Dear Men, Here's Why 'Believing' in Gender Equality Doesn't Make You A Feminist", even as another article on the same portal offers '10 Tips To My Male Friends' who wish to be a part of feminist movements. While these articles sketch a set of parameters for male feminism, an article published in *The Hindu* explains 'Why men cannot be feminists'. And these are just the titles of articles, published in the previous three/four years alone. They attest a certain kind of popular support that feminist initiatives have garnered in recent times while registering a suspicion about men's enthusiasm for feminism. Most of these articles attempt to identify a true male ally against the threat of men using feminism to sexist ends. The tenor of most articles is strikingly similar. The male feminist is either an accomplished ally or simply a wolf in sheep's clothing. What is sorely missed in these popular pieces are the processes, the conditions, the motivations, the triumphs, and failures of becoming male feminists.

Both in South Asia and internationally, the question of men's role in feminist social movements has garnered much public attention. This interest coexists with a largely unwritten history of men's varied engagements with feminisms in India. It is this curiosity about the terms of men's participation in feminism which provides the

political and theoretical provocation for this edited volume. The intellectual field of research on women and gender in India has largely been a women's domain; historically, the corpus of feminist literature in the region has had few male contributors. Nevertheless, there have been some men in Indian higher education who have engaged with feminist thought and continue to employ feminist modes of inquiry in their academic and activist work. What drew these men to feminism? What sustained their participation? What reactions did their alliance impel? How did feminism change them? Did they feel the need to change feminism at all? This anthology of essays brings critical attention to men's involvement in feminist research, activism, and writing in India. By reflecting on what it means to be a 'man' and do 'feminism', our contributors complicate the easy link that is often drawn between identity-attachments and alliance with politics. They offer inroads into thinking about how men can ally with feminist initiatives in ways that do not blunt but rather enhance the critical edge of feminisms.

To speak of men practising feminist social research is to confront an apparent contradiction. As the principal beneficiaries of patriarchal arrangements, what motivates men's affiliations with a critical perspective which seeks to dismantle this system? The suspicion underlying such a query ought not to be taken as an opportunity to allege that women feminist scholars are territorial about the field of gender studies. The issue here is not a matter of mere jurisdictional dispute. Feminist struggles against gender inequalities have, at one level, been struggles against masculinist appropriation of critical voices. There is continuing need, therefore, to be alert to such tendencies in men's encounters with feminism, especially when men claim authorial roles. What concerns us in this collective project is neither the question of epistemic ability – can men produce feminist scholarship – nor the normative question of should men do feminist research. In the four decades of the institutionalization of women's studies in India and the gradual spread of feminist concerns to mainstream disciplines, we now have at least two generations of male scholars for whom feminism has been a major part of their formal intellectual training. For the few among them who choose to research problems of gender and sexuality, feminist insights are an organic component of their approach. The relationship of benefit that men as a social group have with patriarchy means, however, that men's alignment with feminist knowledge and activist projects has particular dynamics of power. The contributors to this volume

trace the workings of this power in diverse contexts of men's pro-feminism in India.

## Practices of male feminism

In his chapter in this volume, Sanjay Srivastava configures this relationship between men and the practice of feminist research in terms of a broader conversation between masculinity studies and feminism. He asks, "Can men as social beings take part in a 'conversation' that seeks to dismantle their social selves?" By drawing our attention to the residual characteristic of gendered power, he reminds us that all men, irrespective of their caste, class, race, or sexuality, share a certain form of power as men. For him, the sex of the knower in masculinity studies is epistemologically significant in order to acknowledge the opacity of power and recognize its creative potential. In some contrast to Srivastava's discussion of the positionality of the researcher, Pushpesh Kumar lays greater emphasis on the gender regimes that operate in mainstream social science disciplines that produce 'separate spheres' of scholarship and ethnographic practice for men and women. In other words, who studies what and using which methods is less a reflex of social structure than it is about limited disciplinary frameworks and pedagogical practices. The gendered nature of knowledge production – that is, the devaluation of knowledge by women on women – can be partially undone, Kumar argues, by challenging the gender regimes which train and recruit men to study men's lives alone, and that too not in ways that acknowledge male privilege. Drawing on his experience as a fieldworker, Kumar demonstrates that ethnographic practice which prioritizes observation over listening is masculinist; he advocates, instead, collaborative fieldwork between male researchers and female research assistants. Unlike in Srivastava's discussion, for Kumar the sex of the ethnographer is not as significant as the academic socialization that researchers are subjects of, which often leads to the production of academic texts which are blind to issues of gender. However, both chapters dwell on these issues in ways that conceptualize the feminist standpoint as a contingent achievement, as an outcome of struggles against dominant thought. In doing so, they illustrate precisely how men who engage in such tussles may be able to produce anti-patriarchal knowledge.

Many essays in the volume, particularly those written by men, use the autobiographical mode to unravel men's pro-feminism. They

run the risk of being labelled 'narcissistic' or an exercise in navel gazing. We feel that the autobiographical narrative permits the evaluation of the intellectual practices and labour process entailed in the production of feminist scholarly work (Stanley 1990). It allows the reader to grasp the social locations and conditions that prompt men to undertake feminist research and the struggles involved in an enterprise that is all too often considered ontologically/epistemologically suspect. The autobiographical text, in this case, permits a recovery of the unwritten history of men's participation in feminist endeavours. Instead of viewing this mode as spotlighting the authors, we contend that these narrative illuminate the embedded academic and activist networks, friendships, forms of intellectual exchange, the dominant ideas that frame feminist social science research, as also the inspiration and failures, structural barriers, and gender regimes that inflect the lives of individuals who engage with feminism (see Stanley 1993). In doing so, one is able to focus on the biographical (of others) and the socio-historical elements that enable the constitution of the autobiographical narrative. In other words, the reflexive accounts in our volume are less a compendium of individual achievements and much more a documentation of a specific history of academic production and political practice. The focus on the personal, in these chapters, is consistent with the pioneering use of life histories by R.W. Connell (1995) to document the synthesis between individual experience, institutional history, social structure, and ideology.

If Kumar's chapter identifies the unavailability of adequate feminist training in Indian higher education as one of the many reasons why one generation of men have stayed away from feminist involvement, Mangesh Kulkarni's chapter offers a glimpse into how some men countervail this lack. The absence of feminism in his schooling as a political scientist, in the first half of the 1980s, was remedied subsequently when Kulkarni joined a women's university as a faculty member. Regular professional contact with women feminist scholars and the force of certain prominent events of sexual violence impressed on him the need to interrogate men's lives through self-directed study. Kulkarni's account is significant in that it reveals how the study of masculinity in India, from its initial days, developed in close conversation with women feminists who underlined the importance of incorporating feminist insights in this new field of inquiry. It also underscores the influence of women scholars in the intellectual development of pro-feminist men in the academy.

Any effort to explicate men's alliance with feminism must necessarily respond to the following question: What provokes some men to undertake difficult ideological struggles and ally with feminism? Answering this query requires detailed historical and ethnographic research into men's complex reactions to feminism in both their public and private lives. The chapters in this volume offer partial accounts of men's provocations for doing feminism, the varied contexts in which they find articulation, and the different implications of such practices. In the context of higher education, it is often assumed that male academics have only opposed the pursuit of feminist goals within institutes of higher learning. While fully acknowledging the pernicious thrust of academic anti-feminism, we contend that it is more enabling to ask instead: How did some men in the academy – in their various roles as teachers, researchers, administrative staff, and so on – support women feminist scholars as they began to call the lie on so-called general theory and research, and highlight sexual politics within university spaces? How did this supportive stance complicate such pro-feminist men's relationship with patriarchal structures within universities, their colleagues, and friends? Answering these questions will, at one level, require that we embark on a 'recovery project' to uncover a new gendered history of feminist studies in India. Such a venture, however, would not be in the nature of showcasing 'positive male role models' within academia. Rather, it would be aimed at unearthing resources that could potentially provide fresh ground for feminist theorizing about knowledge production in India. It would offer insight into the complex relationships between knower, known, and feminist thought, and the micro-histories of their ramifications in the domain of everyday interactions. The "optimism of the intellect" (Harvey 2000: 17) which underpins such a project appears to us to be vital at a time when, once again, a variety of politically suspect initiatives under the labels of 'women's rights' and 'gender equality' – either led by or foregrounding men – are laying claims on behalf of 'progressive change' in India. The MARD (Men Against Rape and Discrimination) campaign launched by the Bollywood actor/director Farhan Akhtar is such a case in point. Such campaigns go only so far as to replace toxic masculinity with a form of paternalism intrinsic to ideas such a 'real men', 'respect', 'honour'; they venerate women's minds and bodies in ways that chime with patriarchal codes of gender. As Naomi Scheman has reminded us, 'trustworthiness' is an important dimension of processes of knowledge production

(and, we would add, of activism). If a set of knowledge claims and activist initiatives, or the procedures by which one has arrived at them, cannot be trusted, they are unlikely to aid our endeavours at improving the world (referred to in Longino 2010). It is vital, therefore, to highlight the conceptual and lived practices through which pro-feminist men might avoid their feminism becoming paternalistic or another instrument of control.

While existing histories of women's studies in India have, on some occasion, acknowledged the important role that a few men played in the institutionalization of the discipline, they are silent on the issue of male feminist practice in these spaces. Our co-authored essay, in this volume, on men's participation in one such centre of women's studies in eastern India, suggests that while general support from administration and faculty could be enlisted from socially-progressive men, feminist engagement was far less forthcoming. The minority of men who have been involved in feminist research and pedagogy, however, have had to negotiate stigma, uncertain career prospects, and even open hostility from both women and men in the university. We found that often men who did engage actively with feminism were able to recuperate from their biographies moments when they had to confront gender injustice in their families and this impelled their identification with feminism. But not all men who support feminism or engage with women's studies exhibit feminist consciousness. Sometimes men's pro-feminist activities are provoked by pragmatic choices. A few men among this group, however, develop strong convictions about the politics of feminism and this permeates both the work they do as scholars/teachers and their negotiations of patriarchal codes in their personal and public lives. This idea, that men's alliances with feminism are always fraught with difficult questions about the relationship between identity and political positioning, recurs in many of the chapters that make up this volume.

Anirban Das's contribution to this project shows that as a male scholar of feminist philosophy he has had to routinely face sneers from male colleagues that his work is feminist studies and not 'real philosophy'. Das's experience is to be seen also in the light of another kind of reaction to feminist men such as that expressed by a young woman feminist scholar, who alleged, in the conference on which this volume is based, that masculinity studies is yet another set of conversations between men about men. Such allegations neglect to note that in South Asia and beyond, the more influential

feminist accounts of men's lives have come from women scholars. More worryingly, this amnesia is symptomatic of a habitual reduction of politics to identity. Thus, in thinking about men as producers of feminist knowledge it becomes important for Das to dwell on the questions: "Who is the subject of feminism? Is the politics of feminism coupled to the identity of the 'woman'?". In his chapter, Pushpesh Kumar alludes to the social stigma that pro-feminist men have to confront from other men as betrayers to the cause of masculinity and male privilege. Continuing his work as pro-feminist scholar, therefore, required that Kumar find ways to manage such indictments in his daily life. Then, as Mangesh Kulkarni's narrative reveals, men's involvement in feminist projects are characterized by ideological suspicions on both sides, as some men studying men caution women feminists against 'misandry' and some women scholars continue to argue that "no man could claim to be a feminist in good faith; only women could truly inherit the legacy of feminism due to their direct experience of patriarchal oppression" (Kulkarni, in this volume).

Mohan Rao's essay, which blends the history of feminist engagement with public health and population policy in India with an autobiography of his association with women's rights groups, provides a narrative counter to this story of men's struggle to fit in to feminist spaces. He writes:

> What I found remarkable was the work we did came glowing with warmth and friendship, despite being argumentative Indians . . . there were times when I was the only man in a room full of women. Not once did I feel out of place or excluded or odd.

Rao's account of his acquaintance with prominent feminist texts and his subsequent friendships and work with well-known feminists such as Veena Mazumdar, Brinda Karat, and Betsy Hartmann demonstrate the relative ease with which some men have been able to embrace feminist values and have found acceptance within feminist circles. Significantly, Rao also notes that many men who were committed to gender justice did not necessarily identify as feminists.

In a relevant discussion, Radhika Chopra has called attention to the different reactions that men have to the terms 'feminism' and 'gender equality'. She notes that while men may profess support of gender equality, they seldom identify as feminist or even pro-feminist. From this she infers that identifying as feminist seems to

provoke anxieties about masculinity, in the sense that it conjures feelings of emasculation in most men. Men can side with the project of gender equality because it resonates with broader democratic ideals and conceptions of human rights without implying any reconsideration of conduct and identity. As Chopra (2003) writes, "It's hard to profess a belief in gender inequality without sounding anti-democratic, even inhuman. But everyone – both men and women – can refuse to be pro-feminist without sounding anti-women." The research presented in this anthology highlights the varied contexts in which men's pro-feminisms find articulation.

## Achieving a feminist standpoint

In attempting to understand how men might ally with feminism in trustworthy ways, it is useful to heed debates within feminist standpoint theories, which have challenged the supposed neutrality of scientific knowledge production and argued that it represents "a dominant, western, bourgeois, white supremacist, androcentric, heteronormative culture" (Harding 2004: 5). Two issues that have animated these debates and are pertinent for our discussion are (a) social differences among women, and (b) marginal social groups' especial investment in oppositional thinking and social change. Put briefly, standpoint theorists argue that women are variously placed within different social structures and these different locations influence their politics in complicated ways. Taking this perspective into account implies that the feminist standpoint is an achievement, an outcome of having struggled successfully against the interpellations of ideology. As Sandra Harding explains, "A standpoint is not a perspective; it does not just flow spontaneously for the conditions of women's existence. It has to be wrestled out against the hegemonic dominant ideologies that structure the practices of daily life" (1998: 185). The feminist standpoint is, therefore, neither a biological imperative nor an automatic entitlement of marginal social locations. Consequently, we arrive at a space where, notionally, a case can be made for men doing feminism. Our contributors in this volume provide glimpses into how men might struggle against patriarchal interpellations to approximate a feminist standpoint.

Oishik Sircar's intervention in this volume raises questions about the possibilities and limits of men's feminism by focusing on the issue of 'conduct'. He contends that men's feminism cannot simply be an epistemological virtue but rather needs to be an embodied

way of making sense of and living in the world. Using autobiographical elements, he shares his feminist inheritances as a law student to underline that men such as Upendra Baxi and S. P. Sathe, who have significantly contributed to the cause of gender justice in this country, did not necessarily identify or were identified as feminists. As a practicing heterosexual, married, elite, and upper-caste man, Sircar is compelled to reflect on how men's relations with domestic labour and capital complicate their self-identification as feminist. Such an understanding of men's relationship to feminism extends Srivastava's contention in his chapter that

> Men who study masculinities can make a significant contribution to the study of social injustice and power relations through recognition of the opacity of power, such that even as they seek to undo its effect, they cannot ever fully speak for the powerless; their task must be confined to undoing their own histories.

Srivastava understands this "history of the self" as involving a "critical historicization of *experience*". When men undertake such a task, refracted by the prism of their own experiences of masculinity, they can contribute to feminist understandings of gender and sexuality by highlighting the social construction of maleness. Anticipating charges of 'masculine nativism', he argues that men can also study women and women's worlds to understand how cultures of masculinity shape them. In this, Srivastava sees a supplementary role for masculinity studies to the project of feminism.

It is appropriate to think about the category of 'experience' as we enunciate men's relationship to feminism. We argue that for several men who espouse feminism in their research/activism/writing, their differential access to patriarchal dividends leads them to connect their experiences of disadvantage with feminist insights into gender relations. In other words, male suffering can potentially provide inroads into modes of thinking which oppose patriarchal power. What does men's struggle to practice feminism in various domains of activity entail? The feminist standpoint, fundamentally, involves the recognition of male privilege in social life. In attempting to ascertain how men may access this political and epistemological position, we would emphasize the experiential conditions which enable men to acknowledge this imbalance of power. To trace the trajectory of this struggle we need to first underscore that there exist power differentials among men. The strongest vectors of men's

disempowerment vis-à-vis the sex–gender system are sexuality and gender performance. Failure to perform the hegemonic masculine ideal (and here we must note that other bases of inequality such as class, caste, religion, and so forth inflect this ideal in complex ways) can provoke different responses from men.

The most seductive response to this marginalization is to strive to achieve the hegemonic ideal, thereby entering the domain of "complicit masculinity" (Connell 1995: 79). Failure, when read as a failing, merely restates patriarchal understandings of gender and is, therefore, at variance with the feminist standpoint. In other words, when failure is understood and accepted in terms of the dominant expectations of gender, such interpretations remain restricted within patriarchal meaning systems. Failure, however, may also impel men to question the social arrangement which concomitantly produces hegemonic gender ideals and multiple sites of oppression. The cognizance of failure may facilitate men to particularize their experiences, thereby exposing unqualified claims of universality as ideological. We contend that the recognition of experiences of male failure in the terms described above allows for a distinction to be drawn between men's subject position as the beneficiaries of patriarchy and men's political position which may approximate, in contingent ways, a feminist standpoint. In their efforts to attend to the personal, our contributors raise a series of questions about what men's attainment of a feminist standpoint means. Does it entail men's use of feminist tools to produce certain kinds of scholarship? Does it involve an active feminist practice aimed at social change? Is it a reflexive exercise in self transformation? What do all these processes entail?

While failure may be a useful trope, although by no means a universal one, to explain men's proclivity to feminism, Anirban Das's essay argues how men's access to feminism is punctuated by structures of guilt. He notes:

> One's position in a field structured hierarchically as a pre-given 'fact' lets him enjoy privileges and power over the 'women' even if he does not actively pursue the position. The guilt that one thus gets inscribed by is structural and not dependent upon his intentions or actions. Even active refusal to access one's privileges leaves residual effects of the hierarchy that marks one as the dominant. A not-so-thin line of demarcation separates the powerful who declines his benefits and the abject who does not have access to those.

While most of our male contributors display a certain caution in creating a space for themselves in feminist practice, it is Srimati Basu's essay in the volume which explicitly challenges gendered identity as the basis of epistemology. Carefully recounting feminist work on intersectionality, she emphasizes the potential for convergence between standpoint theories and perspectives that foreground identity as fluid, contingent, discursive, and strategic on the issue of knowledge and power. She argues against both explicit and implicit reiteration of the binary categories of 'male' and 'female' in feminist scholarship and avers the complex imbrications of gender with other vectors of power including race, class, and caste. In doing so, she is able to create a more agentic space for men in feminism beyond the tropes of loyalty, support, or admiration of feminist projects. In foregrounding men's complex relationship with masculinity and intersectional differences among men, Basu contends that "'male' feminists would vary in their affiliations according to the cultural categories of maleness within which they locate themselves, and in the feminisms they prioritize based on those gendered identities or from other locations of identification or interest". This approach, according to her, avoids the problem of a pre-given role for men in feminism and also allows one to analyze how men's subjectivities and politics can be shaped by feminism.

## Sites of intervention

Even as we emphasize men's relationship to exalted patterns of masculinity in their struggle to attain feminist perspectives on social arrangements, it is important to simultaneously highlight that 'gender' is a relational concept. It is, therefore, crucial to dwell on how the question of male feminism relates to men's understanding of women's lives. Discussions around standpoints have demonstrated that social location bears in significant ways both on the knowledge claims that are made and how these are received. In this sense, any speech act, and particularly the act of speaking for others, is entrenched in circuits of power. In the evaluation of truth claims, there is a sense that privileged locations are discursively suspicious in that acts of representation by privileged groups often result in re-enforcing hierarchical social relations (Alcoff 1991). Yet, it bears recall that while social location is certainly epistemologically salient, it does not determine meaning and truth in an absolute way (Alcoff 1991). Some chapters in this book elaborate the conditions

under which men's speech about women's experiences can become credible contribution to feminist politics.

One response to this issue comes from V Geetha, in her contribution to this volume. At a time when the women's movement was struggling to make sense of the interlocking of caste- and gender-based violence, she describes her enabling encounter with Raj Gauthaman – Tamil literary historian and critic – particularly his re-reading of the Sangam corpus of poems. She is struck by the manner in which Gauthaman is able to establish caste and gender as relatively autonomous systems of oppression, even as they work together to constitute experiences of marginality. Geetha shows how he achieves this synthesis by emphasizing women's narratives of labour, desire, and love. In thinking about Gauthaman's works as exercises in feminist criticism, Geetha draws attention to the critic's capacity for what she calls "imaginative generosity", that allows him/her to grasp the collective anguish of marginalized social groups. It is this creative capacity that enables Gauthaman to fruitfully address the caste–gender conundrum. Geetha describes her relationship with Gauthaman, a relationship between literary critics, as "a curious friendship". A friendship such as this owes its strength as much to their shared political and ethical concerns as to the "comradeship of the mind" that facilitates intersubjective understanding.

Charu Gupta offers another possibility in her exploration of profeminist moments in men's writing on women. She chooses Premchand, the most prominent Hindi writer of the early 20th century, and recent popular writings by Dalit men celebrating the heroic role of Dalit *viranganas* in the revolt of 1857. While the former has been accused by critics of romanticizing Dalit femininity and the latter's representation of feminine valour is overtly masculine, Gupta reads against the grain to identify critiques of caste and gender in these writings that may have feminist resonances. In Premchand, she is able to note characterizations of Dalit women that go beyond stereotypes and challenge caste-based sexual violence. The overt masculinity of Dalit *viranganas* is assuaged by the ability of such narratives to claim dignity and respectability for Dalit men and women. Gupta's exercise offers us an interesting historical lens to evaluate writings by men – particularly reformist and activist in nature – which enable critiques of gender, however preliminary, as proto-feminism.

J Devika's chapter uses debates in Kerala's public sphere in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in addition to interviews with feminist

activists from that time, to understand men's role in feminism. She argues that in the 1980s, male left intellectual and activists engaged with feminist ideas in a concerted way primarily to invigorate socialist struggles. She writes:

> at a time when men in Anglo-American feminism seem to have been struggling to make sense of their place 'in' feminism or their relation 'with' feminism (for example, Smith 1985), male feminists in Kerala were confidently 'making' feminism or 'doing it', with great good intentions but little self-reflexivity.

Nevertheless, their efforts did help forge a feminist vocabulary in the broader public sphere. Devika notes that with the arrival of 'gender mainstreaming' in the 1990s, men's presence in feminism receded, and proceeds to unravel the consequences of this for the pursuit of feminist agendas in the region.

The dominant reaction of men to feminism in India has been one of opposition. In the academy, for instance, such antagonism has been staged variously by trivializing feminist concerns, theories, and methodologies (Tellis 2001), resisting the institutionalization of women's studies' inconsonance with feminist goals, or using 'gender' and 'feminism' to merely re-energize tired mainstream disciplines, only to eclipse the political/theoretical lustre of feminist inquiry (Rege 2003). Such reactions need to be consistently exposed as acts of patriarchal power within universities. And yet, simply gathering evidence of men's animosity to feminism adds little to our conceptual understanding of either male privilege or possible avenues for radical change. Indeed, such a narrative is incapacitating in demonstrating the repeated failure of men and feminism to forge an alliance with each other. This volume responds to the need for empirical discoveries that will chronicle a different story of the relationship between men and feminism.

One arena for such discoveries is Queer Studies and the Gay Rights Movement in India, which have witnessed tentative coalitions between gay men and feminism. Ashley Tellis's essay offers a critique of the heterosexism of the women's movement in India. He reads a series of letters exchanged between Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI) and Akhil Bharatiya Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Delhi Chapter (AIDWA) and the National Federation of Indian Women, Delhi Committee (NFIW) in 2001. AIDWA and NFIW had denied CALERI the right to march with posters on the occasion

of International Women's Day. Parsing through these letters, he is able to show both ideologically and semantically the separation of the lesbian from women's issues in India. Not only is the women's movement silent on the issue of sexual difference, the myopia of heterosexist feminism is at its worst when lesbianism is reduced to an upper-class affliction. Tellis notes, "Lesbians cause confusion, lesbian issues are a diversion from labour issues and lesbian women sacrifice poor women, lesbian women are not, or cannot be, therefore, poor women. It is an upper-class disease." For Tellis, this lesbophobia of the women's movement lays bare its "overriding and uncritical desire for men", its phallocentrism. He accuses the LGBT movement, alternately called the 'queer movement', of being phallocentric as well. By questioning the response of some gay lawyers on the proposed changed to rape laws in India (post-Nirbhaya), he chides them for insensitivity to feminism and the history of the women's movement in India. In doing so, he foregrounds gay male entitlement and privilege against lesbians and bisexuals. On a rather polemical note, he disavows the existence of the transgender movement in India. He is critical of the conflation of hijras with transgender and their inadequate engagement with feminism, and draws attention to the nuanced and admittedly antagonistic articulations of feminism and transgender theory in the West. In effect, he makes an important point that movements which are meant to critique heteropatriarchy fail to do so by not complicating masculinity and sexual difference. The queer movement's claim to fluidity and transgression he dismisses as "rhetorical scam" in so far as it leaves unquestioned the privileges of men in the movement as gay, straight, or trans.

A second domain where we might encounter a relationship of support between men and feminism is pro-feminist men's organizations working to address violence against women. An early initiative in this was the formation of Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) in 1993 in Mumbai. Since then, a number of groups across the country – in both metropolitan and non-urban settings – registered variously as societies and NGOs, have worked with men with the objective of bringing about feminist change. These interventions have taken a variety of forms. A key approach has been conducting gender sensitization workshops with men and boys in various educational settings, as well as in the spaces where they congregate for leisure, such as tea stalls, sporting fields, and street corners (Mogford et al. 2015). Given that male friendships continue to be

the primary route through which men in India acquire knowledge about sexuality, it has been important to target the routines of male sociability for disseminating feminist ideas (Verma et al. 2006). The imperative has been to use different media – painting, films, songs, games – to familiarize men with key feminist insights pertaining to violence, sexual health, family, desire, education, homophobia, and interpersonal relationships.

Practitioners stress the importance of an intersectional approach in such work not only to grasp the complex nature of marginalization but also as a strategy for handling men's initial resistance to acknowledging male privilege (Das and Singh 2014). Thus, in gender sensitization workshops with men and boys, it has been useful to begin with other vectors of inequality such as class, caste, and age as a way of leading up to conversations on patriarchy. The sustained work in this area has generated a range of important learnings for feminist engagement with men towards social change. Unlearning patriarchal roles allows men to have a more fulfilling relationship with the women and children in their lives, but it also comes with certain costs – in becoming more sensitive to women's social situations, they often lose old friendships with men and sometimes even the support of their natal families (Ibid).

Another area of activism has been at the level of policy. One aspect of this effort has been directed at understanding in what ways, if at all, men are included in policies aiming to deliver gender justice (Centre for Health and Social Justice and SAHAYOG 2009). Another has been to dialogue with policymakers to incorporate a critical perspective on masculinities in gender-related policy initiatives in the country at various levels (see Chatterji 2011).

These pro-feminist men's groups have been instrumental in leading a shift from an exclusive focus on men as the problem to thinking of men as also part of the solution. Just as crucial has been their awareness that the primary focus of gender development needs to remain on women; of this, work with men and boys is a necessary and complementary part. Some of this practice has progressed in synergy with similar organizations in other parts of the world. While this collaboration has often been fruitful in exchanging strategies of intervention, it has simultaneously signalled the need to avoid formulaic replication sans attention to the local contexts which frame gender relations (Das and Singh 2014). Therefore, collective efforts to change men have had to be mindful of the specific forms of stratification which particularize each society.

The formation and activities of pro-feminist men's groups in India need to be seen in the context of national and international trends in development discourses around gender. The Beijing Declaration, adopted in 1995, acknowledged the need to enlist men in the fight towards ending gender disparity. 'The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality' was officially accepted as an axis of operation at the 48th session of the United Nations in March 2004. An alliance – functioning at a global scale – called 'MenEngage' was established in the same year, involving non-governmental groups and United Nations agencies committed to working with men towards gender equality. In India, in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, there was a vast increase in state and foreign donor funding which led both to a proliferation of NGOs in the country and a widening of the range of issues that they undertook. These shifts in both funding patterns and thinking about gender provided the institutional and conceptual infrastructure necessary for pro-feminist men's organizations to develop in India.

These collective efforts, largely led by and centred on men, have elicited a variety of responses from women's groups. There has been the anxiety that these men's groups will inadvertently siphon already scarce resources away from programmes directly aimed at improving women's lives. There is also the concern that "working with men and boys" has become the end-goal, complete onto itself, instead of being a necessary appendage to attaining the larger objective of gender equality (Flood and Howson 2015). Such skepticism notwithstanding, pro-feminist men's groups have also been welcomed by several women's organizations, with many women's groups incorporating work with men and boys on issues of masculinity in their programmes towards gender justice.

## Conclusion

Social sciences in India have seen much debate on the associations between "the politics of experience and the ethics of theorising" (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 224). These contestations have been particularly fraught in the contexts of caste and gender. The essays gathered here explore this abiding concern with the politics of location and enunciation in the specific context of men and feminist knowledge production, sites of intervention, and writing in India. It is often asked: If the costs of patriarchy to men are so high, why don't they do something to change patriarchal social arrangements?

This edited volume is an effort to document how men – as individuals and as part of various collectives – come to embrace feminism, their impetus for such alliance, the fractures in it, and the ways these are addressed intellectually and in practice, in their public and private lives.

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Part I

# Institutions


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Chapter 1

# Disrupting coherence

## Self-reflections of a male ethnographer

*Pushpesh Kumar*

> [W]e needed to persuade our colleagues that anthropology that takes gender into account is not only a good anthropology but a better anthropology.
>
> – Abu-Lughod (1990: 16)

I have been pursuing ethnography since my doctoral fieldwork, which began in the late 1990s. I wish, therefore, to wear the identity of 'ethnographer'. Ethnography, however, does not constitute a romanticizing pedagogy for me. I believe in combining sociological sensibility with my ethnographic endeavours. In my understanding, sociological sensibility implies questions of power, political economy, and historicity in evaluating a given social structure and/or culture. I begin this essay with the methodological and epistemological implications of male ethnographers' (in)accessibility to 'women's world' and the resultant (in)ability to produce a gender-sensitive ethnography. The idea that I wish to consider here is whether the sex of the (male) ethnographer determines what information he can collect from the field and what aspects of gendered culture he is likely to ignore in the fieldwork process primarily on account of his own (masculine) gender.

This issue has been debated at some length by male ethnographers in Western contexts who have been able to write gender-sensitive ethnographies (Berliner and Falen 2008). In comparison, Indian and South Asian sociologists and social anthropologists, who use ethnography as a research method, have barely found it significant to initiate any discussion around the theme. The questions that perplex me are: Does sexual division of labour in private, intimate, and market spaces also institute itself in the domain of academic

disciplines? Is a gender-sensitive ethnography simply unthinkable when the fieldworker is male? If the latter is true then is it because of the anatomy of the male ethnographer or because of the (gendered) social structure of the field prohibiting the ethnographer's 'transgressions' in collecting information about and from women? Sylvia Junko Yanagisako and Jane Fishburne Collier (1987: 26) disagree that the sex of the ethnographer intrinsically engenders empathy for subjects belonging to one's own sex. They write, "We appear to have left behind naïve claims . . . that female anthropologists intuitively understand the subjective experience of their female informants simply by dint of their sex." The logic could be extended to their male counterparts as well. Can we assume that 'truth' about men or a 'unitary brotherhood' is 'out there' for a male ethnographer to document and describe effortlessly?

## Gender regime and the male ethnographer

The simplistically essentialist dyads of men studying men and women studying women reinforce and prematurely create a self-imposed limit (Miescher 2008) in the research process. It seems pertinent to unpack such naturalistic assumptions by using Connell's (1987) idea of 'gender regime', indicating "the state of play in gender relation" within any institution. One of the most common ways to understand gender regime would be to observe sexual division of labour, the allocation of particular types of work to particular gender categories of people within any organization. This allocation, according to Connell, becomes a constraint on further practice.

Considering departments of anthropology or sociology as training and recruiting grounds for ethnographers, the pedagogical practices both in the Western and non-Western contexts constitute a 'gender regime' which reinforces certain notions of 'field' and 'fieldwork', demarcating appropriate subjects of investigation for male and female ethnographers. James R. Gregory attempts to demystify what he calls the mythical construction of male ethnographers' self and denies all claims that men cannot do gender-sensitive ethnography. Gregory (1984) considers the idea of the male ethnographer's supposed inaccessibility to the 'woman's world' to be entrenched in academic institutions where anthropologists receive their training. This academic culture constitutes a charter for future behaviour in shaping a male ethnographer's research problem and developing a research design that permits him to work primarily with male informants.

Gregory confesses that in his fieldwork among the Mopan Mayan Indians of Southern Belize, he ended up with field notes that were male-centric. The realization that women made significant contributions in enhancing men's position in the local polity and governance in traditional arrangement surfaced only after a decade of his fieldwork, when he got an opportunity to teach a course on 'sex role and culture' in 1979. Gregory's self-introspection, itself provoked by his teaching engagements, led him to re-conceptualize the fiesta sponsorship which was his major ethnographic concern.

In a traditional social order, a fiesta sponsorship determined a man's position in civil and religious hierarchies of local government. But, men's fiesta sponsoring invariably involved preparation of special foods and hosting of activities within the household, where women made substantial contributions. Wives and daughters regularly helped out in phases of the farming cycle and were sole processors of the products of farming, hunting, fishing, gathering, and stock-raising activities. Several unmarried adult women undertook many of these activities without the aid of men. All this vital information was glossed over and remained unrecorded in Gregory's ethnography. Similarly, while mapping changes in the village economy after the collapse of the traditional system in 1960, women's contributions to social and economic activities were completely overlooked by him.

Gregory's realization about the gender-blindness of his ethnography is attributed to his exposure to a different curriculum: 'sex role and culture'. What is implicit in Gregory's account is that the 'gender regime' prevailing in disciplinary practices such as anthropology constitutes a sort of 'belief system' which determines the path charted by ethnographers and influences their research agenda in a way that culminates in gender-blind field notes and hence gender-blind ethnographies. We may derive from this narrative that if the existing gender regime within the academy is questioned and gender perspectives are incorporated in the teaching–learning process, the practice of ethnography might be very different.

Gregory writes that the reason male ethnographers keep away from collecting information from and about women is the low status of information about the women's world. He remarks that if information about the women's world is redefined as being 'important', then male ethnographers will not need much urging to pursue it. The practical problems in the field can be resolved through collaborative work between male and female ethnographers. While it is

not very certain that restructuring the university by mainstreaming gender will encourage every male anthropologist to produce a feminist text, I am hopeful that this will at least prompt male researchers to ask certain questions which they easily dismiss as 'not their job'. The following question arises: What kind of men would be more attracted to feminist issues? There is, of course, a genuine reason for men who are not comfortable with patriarchal structures, due to a variety of reasons such as a different sexual orientation, to be attracted to feminism, but an overemphasis on this will create another essentialist trap. Can we conclude that all pro-feminist men have a different sexual biography? Without stretching this point further, I must submit here that we need to transform the 'gender regime' prevailing in the academy which fosters a politics of 'separate sphere', discouraging male ethnographers from designing their studies to accommodate gender aspects of the culture they study.

Based on Gregory, I emphasize that if a gender perspective is mainstreamed and information pertaining to the women's world is defined within the academy as 'important', there could be a possibility of a greater number of male ethnographers producing gender-sensitive ethnographies. Sulmith Reinharz (quoted in Stacey 1988) emphasizes that the experiential problems of fieldwork seem minor in comparison to the quality of relations that an ethnographer develops with the interlocutors. A simple awareness and obligation to record gendered aspects of social life will pave the way for reimagining ethnographic practices from a feminist perspective.

## Men, masculinity, and feminist issues

I wish to emphasize here that masculinity is not a monolith (see Connell 1987, 1995). If masculinity is considered thereby plural and nonmonolithic it always opens a possibility of some men across cultures and societies as being supportive and empathetic to women. In the Indian context, one can refer to the public figures like Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar, whose anti-caste struggles and reflections on socio-political issues always constituted a foregrounding of discriminatory aspects of gender, and the feminist scholarship in India has attempted to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by these great souls in emancipating women.[1] In the Western context too, the pro-feminist men's politics during the 1970s argued the virtues of feminism and in solidarity with the women's movement committed itself to dismantling sexism (see

Capraro 2004). So, the point is, if all women are not committed to feminism and there are women who do not wish to be identified as feminists, we need to welcome men who wish to participate in feminist struggle for equality and emancipation, and definitely there are always those supportive men (see Chopra 2006) who would like to be part of refashioning and remapping the existing gendered social order.

The patriarchal and masculinist power structures definitely suffocate these real and potential 'supportive men' and discourage them to emerge as co-participants in feminist struggles. This is due to a repertoire of banters and jokes prevailing in all patriarchal cultures targeted at men who would wish to show solidarity with women in questioning male domination. Judith Butler (2011) mentions that words alone have the power to craft bodies from their linguistic substance and I have experienced the isolation due to my own association with feminism. Men supporting women's causes and showing interest in feminism are probably looked upon as 'conspirator catalysts' who would reverse the privileged gender order and betray the cause of men; these real and potential agents of change and transformation are likely to be discouraged by subjecting them to sexist jokes and banters. It is interesting to mention some of the remarks intermittently made by my male friends about my interest in feminist literature and readings during my four-year stay in Jawahar Lal Nehru University in Delhi during the mid-1990s. The anecdotes which follow not only capture the fascinating account of patriarchal sentiments but are instructive and suggestive about how popular views about gender are entrenched even within the progressive academic spaces.

One of my friends who hailed from Vishakhapattanam and stayed in the same hostel where I was put up once visited my room. Looking at my books, which were obviously about and on feminism, he gave me a friendly advice to keep away from feminism if I wished to save myself from the menace and catastrophe the ideology will bring to my personal life. With a genial concern he said: "Pushpesh, you will ruin yourself if you continue to read such literature." The other gentleman from Orissa who stayed in the same hostel and was my roommate's friend and pursuing his doctorate in political science could not stop himself by expressing his sincere trepidation when he looked at my study table with plenty of feminist literature. Lifting Susanne Kappeler's *Pornography of Representation*, he uninhibitedly remarked in Hindi: "ye sab padhne ke baad saala

yadi bibi ko . . . kadne jaye to apna khahda hi nahin hoga" ("After reading these books if you wish to have sex with your wife you will not get an erection!"). In a seminar on family, kinship, and gender organized by Professor Tiplut Nongbri in 1995, when I asked a few questions based on my readings of Gayle Rubin, the reputed scholar on gender and sexuality, one of my classmates told me with a jest: "If you were a girl you would have been a sexy feminist!" Another country cousin (from Bihar), an immediate senior in sociology, gave me friendly and elderly advice in Hindi: "yaar ye feminism chod do. Jab tumhari charcha hoti hai to sab log bolte hein – Oh, wahi Pushpesh jo feminism pe kaam kadta hai? Dekho koyi aur topic dhund lo." ("Oh, yaar, please leave this feminism. Whenever there is a discussion about you, people say – 'oh, the same Pushpesh who works on feminism.' Just find a new topic.") These are the concerns doled out and ridicules inflicted upon me; I can just imagine what the same group of people could talk behind my back! These utterances in my understanding are not mere glib and are quite akin to what Foucault (quoted in Butler 2011) calls the regulatory regime, which is a heterosexual imperative enabling certain sexed identification while foreclosing and disavowing other identifications (ibid). These speech acts constitute repeated inculcation of norms.

Despite the reiteration of the normative gender order through different mechanisms such as jokes and banters, as well as naming and marking pro-feminist men as others, there have always been men who have defied the regulatory regimes and have come forward to support women's causes. Here I wish to mention two (male) literary figures from colonial India whose writings reflect remarkable feminist sensibilities. My choice of these writers is only due to certain familiarity with their work rather than for any other predilection. These two literary figures are the famous creative Telugu writer Chalam in the 1920s and the significant Hindi poet and novelist Nagarjuna, who was revolutionizing Hindi literature in the mid-1930s. Chalam and Nagarjuna, both male literary personalities, also reflect significant feminist sensibilities in their work. The contemporary Telugu feminist movement takes inspiration from Chalam's writings and his initiatives to foreground the 'women's point of view' is acknowledged and admired by the feminists of the region (Vindhya 2000). The centrality which Chalam gave to female subjectivity and sexuality form part of not just a debate on morality but on women's need for freedom from oppression (especially within marriage) and for the formation of an identity that

is not repressively feminine (ibid: 178). Chalam was a trailblazer in Telugu literature who unravelled the dynamics of female sexuality and desire, and recognized women's right to sexual pleasure (ibid: 184).

Nagarjuna was not a trailblazer but his novel *Ratinath ki cahachi* (*The Paternal Aunt of Ratinath*), written around 1935, takes the readers to the world of young Brahmin widows and their sexuality. He touches upon widows' 'illicit' pregnancy and the subsequent ostracism and stigma these women faced, but simultaneously the novel also reflects how women forged a network of support to abort the fetus, how this network transcended the caste boundaries, women's agency in critically evaluating widowhood and pregnancy, the alternative institutional arrangement for widows, and the ways cities provided possibilities for 'sexual liberation' for such women, albeit in a limited way. He also charts out the invisible labour of women and women's support to peasant struggle during his time.

Without getting into the details of these authors' reflections on women's conditions, I wish to argue that their writings do show remarkable feminist sensibilities. They were writing during the early decades of 20th century when the women's movement in India was intertwined with nationalist questions. While Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1992) see the reconstitution of patriarchy in colonial India, it needs to be highlighted that the works of these male literary figures assumed proximity to radical feminist agendas. Actually, these writings could anticipate and come close to post-1970s feminist politics in India. What flows from the reflections of Phule to Periyar to Chalam to Nagarjun is a sensibility towards women's issues, a pro-women and pro-feminist stance. So, to say that men cannot participate in feminist politics of change is not always true. We need to create an oppositional culture and in some ways the United Nations' initiative to include men and boys in feminist politics of change is praiseworthy and needs to be pursued more aggressively.

## Experiential, conceptual, authorial, and the question of inaccessibility

As brought out earlier, I do not mean to suggest in any way that the pro-feminist men will displace women in producing feminist knowledge and feminist ethnography. The most important point cited in this context is men's lack of experience and hence the acquisition of subject position of women. In the context of (Dalit) experiences

and the latter's association with theory, Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai (2012: 109) ask the question: "What is important: the possession of experience or the conceptual tools?" Guru (ibid: 117) further writes:

> It becomes the moral responsibility of those who are the recipients of torment, crushing experiences to vocalize the experience of past silence . . . those who are not part of the experience, they can merely share the experience through sympathy with the authors. This is insufficient.

Sunder Sarukkai in the same volume argues against the direct and immediate access to our own experience. Sarukkai (ibid: 148–49) writes:

> we have to be taught to recognize our experiences . . . Our experiences of the world are mediated and thus are not purely subjective . . . We, most often recognize an experience for what it is primarily through conceptualizing it. This is true even for the most basic experiences of pain and emotions . . . thought is always conceptual . . . thought is always linguistic.

While Guru's views are significant that only a tormented person can reflect and vocalize her experience, Sarukkai's assertion of the power of concepts in effectively explicating experiences even of pain and oppression seems to be equally forceful and persuasive. Sarukkai specifically mentions feminism while emphasizing the role of concepts in reflecting on experience. He writes: "Feminism has shown how powerful these concepts can be to re-describe experiences." I pose a question here, whether the experiences and concepts are quite separate? Theories should definitely be based on experiences but why cannot these theoretical and conceptual tools be then used in pedagogical practices and research processes by others who may not be part of that experience? Is it that the conceptual tools emerging out of experiential accounts are useful only for those who are experiencing the oppression, or could they be used for pradagogical and epistemological purposes by others who can develop an empathetic understanding of the subjects without *claiming to speak on behalf of the latter*?

The knowledge of feminism is, first and foremost, knowledge derived from women's experiences (Breeze 2007). How can men

practice feminism then? William Breeze (ibid), a male university teacher who identifies himself as feminist, provides some important ways in which men can participate in feminist struggle for change. To Breeze, the feminist classroom must be a place in which all members come to understand that no one of them can ideally 'speak' for others. Breeze writes:

> Although it is possible for a man to 'speak as' a feminist, much care must be taken in that speech act to emphasise a participatory rather than an authoritative voice . . . the act of 'speaking with' is the ideal discourse position for the male feminist . . . joining *with* women rather than attempting to speak as or *for* women.

With this, Breeze "assumes responsibility" (see Hooks 2000) for ending sexism. Breeze says that he can model feminism in the classroom as a participant rather than an authority. About a male practising feminism, Breeze (ibid) writes: "[I]n speaking from his own experiences in a sexist culture, the male instructor can more easily admit his complicity while also suggesting a possibility for moving toward a non-sexist view and behavior. This, in my understanding, can only happen with the sensible incorporation of feminist concepts in self-reflection and pedagogy." I end here with Cynthia Enloe (2004) who rightly observes: "[F]eminist epistemologies do not have to be women's epistemologies. Feminist epistemologies should be seen as completely human and universal." It echoes Hooks's (2000) assertion that 'Feminism is for Everybody'.

One major problem of 'inaccessibility' is when a male ethnographer attempts to witness and collect information related to 'personal' and bodily aspects of women's lives. Indeed, sometimes it may become impossible to access these 'all-women spaces'. Here I want to emphasize that the ethnographic method should not overstress and privilege 'observing' over 'listening'. Privileging observation would constitute a positivist and masculinist scheme to devalue and delegitimize other sensory sensibilities as inferior. Some male ethnographers have overcome this handicap through collaborative fieldwork, listening to and recording these aspects of women's lives with the help of female research assistants. In his ethnographic fieldwork among the Islamic devout of Egypt, Charles Hirschkind (2001) demonstrates the strength of listening as not a strictly cognitive act, but engaging a range of virtues which can be sedimented in the persona of the listener.

So, it is not the sex of the male ethnographer per se, but probably the social structure and sexual meanings historically institutionalized in the given culture that might deter him to record or ignore certain aspects of social relationships. We cannot ignore here the issue of the male ethnographer as an embodied individual constituted through academic socialization. It appears that by asking questions related to gendered power, sexual division of labour, women's contributions to household economy, men's and women's access to resources and factors inhibiting gender equality, laying bare patriarchal practices, etc., male ethnographers may be able to institutionalize a different, more egalitarian order of ethnographic practice within academia.

## Kinship, gender, and sexuality

In this section, I reflect on my ethnographic journey as a male ethnographer attempting to understand how kinship mediates the life of men and women among the Kolams, a tribal community in southeastern Maharashtra, and how state interventions and developmental projects have affected the quality of gender relations among them. It was a conscious decision to select such issues for my research even against the set convention of the academy at the time.

I grew up during the 1970s, witnessing the ordeal of my mother as a working woman in a small town of northern Bihar. My mother and her colleagues, who worked as lecturers in a local college, were constantly subjected to the moral scrutiny of male homosocial discourses. Rumours about their personal integrity, gossip about their intellectual (in)capability by male colleagues, their struggle to get a proper salary, all made me uneasy about the existing social order. I was completely ignorant about feminism then. My exposure to feminist discourse began in the early 1990s, when I migrated to Delhi for my tertiary education. This gave me a language to express my indignation, which had been dormant in my memory, and I found myself drawn to feminism.

My MPhil dissertation on the control of female sexuality among tribal societies enabled me to familiarize myself with diverse kinship structures and gender (in)egalitarianism. Feminist anthropological literature influenced by Friedrich Engels's hypothesis associating gender inequality with the origin of private property motivated me to choose a community having minimal class differentiation. I had read ethnographic accounts suggesting that class differentiation was

almost non-existent among the forest-dwelling Kolams till the 1940s, since they practised shifting cultivation. The Kolams of this region were able to derive their subsistence mainly from forest products, apart from shifting cultivation. Kinship exerted a greater influence in the past, but even then it substantially mediated community life.

My familiarity with major debates in feminist anthropology enabled me to ask specific questions to men and women: sexual division of labour in home and outside was almost obvious; participation in religion and rituals allowed me to observe many gendered aspects of community life, but I was not able to talk and mingle as freely with women of the community as a female ethnographer could have; I was mostly surrounded by the men of the village who probably thought that they could provide every information I required!

Here, I deliberate upon some of the enabling and disabling factors in my field village facilitating and obstructing my commitment to producing a gender-sensitive ethnographic account. Then, I go on to chart my relation with my key informant, a middle-aged Kolam woman who became my *Sanma* (MZ).[2]

It was not very difficult to interview women in the presence of men because sex segregation among the Kolams of the village is not as entrenched as in other caste groups in the village. Men and women mingled while dancing, women frequented the market and forest without being accompanied by men, married couples freely shared and consumed tobacco and liquor, and joking relations between affinal kin staying within the same settlement were pervasive. All this differentiated the village I was studying from ones where sexual seclusion and *purdah* are strictly observed. Despite this, I could not easily interact with and enter 'all-women spaces', like those involving firewood cutting, gathering, collecting forest bamboo, converting them into saleable items, and walking to sell these products, which fetched them immediate cash. All-women singing sessions were another occasion which I could not participate in. I, therefore, had to search for a woman interlocutor from the community who would facilitate my conversation with women.

I made a request to the village leaders to ask a Kolam woman to assist me in cooking, cleaning, fetching water from the well, etc. This was the only possible way to befriend a community woman. Sanma, being a single, middle-aged woman who generally rendered these kinds of assistance to officers and visitors in the village, was approached for this and she agreed to help me out in my mundane

everyday routine as well as in collecting information from and about women.

Sanma was in her mid-forties when I was in my late twenties. I looked younger than my age. In the days which followed our meeting, Sanma regularly performed domestic labour for me with 'motherly affect' and we were able to forge a 'mother–son' bond, which was gradually recognized and accepted by the community. I had no choice but to allow her to perform these tasks, as the villagers looked at me as a male visitor being assisted by a local woman. But, this 'construct' easily punctured. Women who were sisters of Sanma became my MZ, and my kinship equations were rendered in terms of my being Sanma's son. All her sisters became my MZ, and I was able to become a brother to many men and women.

Sanma's home became my dining and resting place, and since she stayed alone, women routinely gathered there for longer singing sessions, which often turned into gossiping and joking sessions. Women wanted me to record their songs and asked me to replay them. I utilized this opportunity in asking them to explain the meanings of these songs. During these singing sessions and intermittent conversations, women understood the purpose of my fieldwork and began to provide information about what they do and how they run their families, the significance of intra-village marriage from their perspective, how the forest is significant for their fallback position, how remarriage meant losing rights over children from the previous husband, and so on and so forth. Many women who had a troubled marital life or were single were Sanma's close friends and they gradually began to talk about their struggles, their poverty, while also narrating the stories of success, for instance widows who are able to multiply their wealth through hard work.

My relationship with Sanma deepened when she fell ill, and I took her to hospitals. She always cooked delicious food for me, and we went to different temples together. While travelling to pilgrim places and visiting the market to buy essentials, Sanma confided in me many personal experiences, ranging from her delayed menarche, to a troubled marriage, to the violence she experienced as a woman. I could learn from her details about the menstrual taboo and puberty rituals of the Kolams, women's bodily impurity, and the threat they pose to the sacred boundary of the settlement and to the overall well-being of the community. She narrated stories of incest and elopements, sorcery and magic, mobility and freedom enjoyed by women through her own and other women's stories.

In due course, Sanma and my relationship moved beyond the 'mother–son' bond. The mother–son bond was a mere 'public performance', a familiar social relation in the village context. Our relation developed into an unnameable human bond where age, sex, and gender hierarchies began to crumble. When we walked together along an agricultural field and she needed to urinate she would tell me in Marathi with a smile – *tu chal, mi basun yete* ("You go ahead, I will join you soon after relieving myself"). I could accompany groups of women in their long walks inside the forest in search of dried wood and also when they walked equally forbidding distances to the market to sell firewood. This was possible because Sanma always accompanied me on such occasions.

My experiences in the field suggest that there may be certain ways in which obstacles arising from the sex of the ethnographer can be negotiated. I would argue, therefore, that the 'gender regime' of the academy and the field is more disabling than the sex of the ethnographer in producing feminist ethnographies. Male ethnographers remain 'neutral' to gendered aspects of social reality because of the 'gender regime' which the academy predisposes them to, legitimizing their 'neutrality' to issues of gender by overemphasizing narratives of 'inaccessibility to women's worlds'.

## Notes

1 See Chakravarti (1994), Geetha (1988), and Rege (2013).
2 *Sanma* is a local term which means mother's sister (maternal aunt). MZ is an anthropological expression for mother's sister, where M denotes mother and Z stands for sister.

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Chapter 2

# Masculinity studies and feminism

## Othering the self, engaging theory

*Sanjay Srivastava*

### Introduction

Masculinity refers to the *socially produced but embodied ways of being male*. Dominant masculinity stands in a relationship not just to its perceived antithesis, femininity, but *also to those ways of being male* that are seen to deviate from the ideal. It is also for this reason that we speak of *masculinities* rather than 'masculinity'. It is important, however, to remember that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not simply opposite and equal categories, such that (as is frequently asserted) 'each has its own sphere of activity'. Rather, each stands in a hierarchical relationship to the other and the 'feminine' acts as complement to the masculine, defined in a manner that produces masculine identity as a superior one.

It is important, also, to differentiate the linked concepts of 'patriarchy' and 'masculinity'. Patriarchy refers to a *system* of social organization that is organized around the idea of the superiority of *all* men to women. Masculinity, on the other hand, is not only a relationship between men and women but also between men. Hence, we might say that while patriarchy 'makes' men superior, masculinity is the process of producing superior men.

In the field of masculinity studies inspired by feminist approaches to gender, male scholars easily outnumber female ones. This is true for both the global and Indian contexts. The different histories of women's (or gender) studies and masculinity studies account for this situation. The political project of feminism sought to identify, contest, and dismantle the naturalization of gendered subjectivity across diverse contexts such as labour, religion, parenting, sexuality, the state, domesticity, and creativity. The *historical* experience of being a woman has been fundamental to the project of feminism: personal experience has fuelled the politics of resistance and

change that interrogates patriarchal strictures. In nuanced versions of feminist thought, the struggle against patriarchy has not been allowed to efface the imbrications of patriarchal frameworks with those that derive from, say, class and caste privilege, ethnicity, and capital. The most significant participants in feminism's project of transformation have been women since their experience of power has been both immediate and lacerating. The sites of production of counter-discourses are those where the effects of power are directly experienced.

## Masculinity studies

Masculinity studies (I will refer to it in the singular) emerges from a conversation with feminism rather than either political activism that equates to feminist endeavours or reaction against the historical experience of oppression. Masculinity studies constitutes, in this way, a supplementary discourse to feminism. It is in this context that we might ask the following question: Is it possible for men – produced as hierarchically superior through the processes and institutions described in the previous section – to step outside their worlds of privilege and question such privilege? That is to say, can men as social beings take part in a 'conversation' that seeks to dismantle their social selves? One answer to this might be of the kind that such conversations also take place across a number of registers, such as caste and religion where those in positions of power seek to take part in processes of questioning privilege, through engaging with the ideas of the historically marginalized. Hence, it could be argued, feminist-inspired masculinity studies is part of a broader field of political activity. This, however, occludes a significant issue in our understanding of different forms of power and the specific nature of gendered power.

Gendered power is unlike other forms of power in its 'residual' characteristic: we may, for example, eschew caste, class, or race privilege but such disavowal does not affect the advantages of gender; the social learning through which we become men seem impervious to the critiques that are directed at other forms of power. Even in instances where there exists a strong relationship between gendered power and discrimination – such as against homosexual men, who might be viewed as 'effeminate' and hence inferior – those discriminated against may continue to subscribe to masculinist ideologies. Men's involvement with critiques of masculinity is, then,

unlike other forms of politics in as much as it requires intellectual pessimism: it suggests that various forms of 'progressive' politics have, rather than make gendered power transparent, only served to reserve for it a special corner. This is the corner occupied by *all* men irrespective of their beliefs. The gender of the knower becomes significant in as much as, irrespective of all that men do *not* share, they nevertheless share the experience of a certain form of power; while Dalit men may suffer from caste discrimination practiced by upper-caste men (and, frequently, women), the similarity of their socialization as men also engenders commonality. Further, the experience of *shared power* (across differing caste, class, and ethnic positions, say) makes for specific strategies of dissimulation in a manner that is not relevant for the experience of *shared oppression*. Hence, the difficult nature of the question: Is the gender of the knower epistemologically significant? This also, of course, raises another important question: Since all men are not equally privileged, are some men (gays and transgenders, for example) better able to engage with feminism? A straightforward 'yes' is not, however, without problems, for it assumes that sexuality is a politics in itself and does not require a detour through other forms of social awareness, such as those relating to class, caste, and gender. It is hardly a remarkable observation that gay and transgendered men, while suffering one kind of oppression, may not be sympathetic to other kinds that, in fact, prepare the grounds for discriminatory practices against them; a gay identity has never been a guarantee against misogyny.

We must, therefore, recognize the gender of the knower to be significant aspect in the study of masculinities for at least two reasons: first, in order to avoid the intellectual conceit that power is transparent and, second, to explore the creative capacities of the recognition.

Men who study masculinities can make a significant contribution to the study of social injustice and power relations through recognition of the opacity of power, such that even as they seek to undo its effect, they cannot ever fully speak for the powerless; their task must be confined to undoing their own histories. To claim anything more is to dissimulate and assume that relinquishing power is a voluntary act and that the powerful actively seek to don the mantle of powerlessness. Male scholars, through recognition of their own impossible position as gendered beings nurtured within crucibles of power, might be able to take up a significant question within studies of power: How is power made? This is a question within

masculinity studies that men – produced through power-machines such as families, schools, and religious configurations – are well suited to answer. The task of undoing masculine histories does not, however, translate into a dictate that men should not (or cannot) explore women's worlds. This would, clearly, militate against an understanding of gender as a relationship. What is important, rather, is to explore the ways in which masculinities are implicated in the making of 'women' and that which comes to be seen as 'women's world' might itself be produced through collaboration with cultures of masculinities. This is a properly feminist concern and it is in this sense that feminist thought undergirds critical explorations of the cultures of masculinity. Masculinity studies employs insights from feminist thought in recasting analytical frameworks – on which more later in this chapter – in order to comprehend not only the making of gendered power but also the normalization of this process through *quotidian* acts of producing the universal subject of human history.

It is in this context that the ideas of 'making' and 'producing' are crucial to the study of gender identities, for they point to their historical and social nature. The gigantic archive of 'proper' masculine behaviour – in novels, films, advertisements, and folk-advice – would clearly be unnecessary if it was a naturally endowed characteristic. The very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of gender identities; they must continually be reinforced. Following from this, we might also say that masculinity is *enacted* rather than expressed. For, when we say that something is 'expressed', we are working with the idea that it 'already exists', and gender identities in particular do not *already* exist (say, biologically). There is an entire task of building and rebuilding, consolidation, representation, and enforcement; in other words, we must think of gender identities as works in progress.

The opacity of masculine power lies in the constant making and re-making of masculine identities and which, through the processes of reinvention, masks its interest. The production of feminist knowledge will gain through critical awareness of the making of maleness on the part of those whose historical experience makes them particularly suited to the task. This is not to suggest a 'masculinist nativism', such that men are exclusively suited to providing insights on masculinity. Rather, it is to suggest that an history of the self that arises from the critical historicization of *experience* – seeking to

interrogate the structures that gender experience – can, potentially, open up a field of inquiry through a more nuanced understanding of power than the catch-all rubric of patriarchy. The latter summarizes an instance of power, whereas critical masculinity studies, additionally, open up the possibility of intervening in the *quotidian* workings of gendered power through a focus on enlisting the beneficiaries of power in the struggle against it.

## Networks and hierarchies

Historian Rosalind O'Hanlon nicely summarizes the key reason for the study of masculinities. She points out that

> A proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too: at what psychic and social investments sustain their sense of themselves as men, at what networks and commonalities bring men together on the basis of shared gender identity, and what hierarchies and exclusions set them apart.
>
> (O'Hanlon 1997: 1)

What, then, *are* the networks and sites that sustain 'a shared sense of gender hierarchy' and how do they act to establish and maintain 'hierarchies and exclusions'? This section will outline some of the crucial areas that feminist-inspired masculinity studies could focus on. While implicitly drawing upon scholarship for other parts of the world, I will restrict my comments to the specificities of local history and culture that call for interrogation through the lens of masculinity studies.

## Customs, religion, and masculinities

The formation of identities through religion and cultures of masculinity is a prevalent feature of our region. So, for example, debates about 'our traditions' (and how to protect them) often sit alongside expressions of ethnic and religious nationalism based on the forging of a homogeneous cultural identity. In turn, cultural identities are sought to be defined in terms of a consensus that primarily derives from a power hierarchy where men's interests are placed above those of women as a group. Here, the 'honour' of the community becomes coeval with that of men and while both men and women

might be punished for disobeying honour-codes, it is women who bear the greatest burden – sometime with tragic consequences – of upholding community honour.

Expressions of religious nationalism – represented through notions of honour, shame, valour etc. – are commonly based upon appeals to mythic and masculinized histories. In this mythic past, men and women – and hence the society of which they were part – lived harmoniously since, the argument goes, they followed the rules of tradition and each knew his/her organic relation to the other; each acted in a way that was 'proper' to it, biological imperatives having solidified into social norms to produce a well-ordered social machinery. According to such narratives, social disorder comes about as a result of different genders (and, in particular, women) not knowing their pre-ordained roles. Hence, in these ways the politics of the household that oversees the everyday relationships between genders becomes linked with national-level formulations of gender politics. The domestic, then, both draws upon and contributes to broader debates about gender and its manifestations. Ethno-nationalist movements and their gender politics are, therefore, significant sites of discourses of gender power in several ways. For example, ethno-nationalist movements frequently demand the implementation of 'customary' laws that have particularly deleterious effects on the position of women in society. Such movements also contain within them both seeds and justifications of violence against women – frequently organized around notions of honour and shame – as well as non-dominant ethnic groupings.

A great deal of scholarship, both for South Asia as well other parts of the world, has explored overlaps between cultures of masculinity and discourses of customary practices and religious beliefs. The most crucial insight from such scholarship is the modernity – or, recent provenance – of the overlaps. Seungsook Moon (2002) has pointed out that the post-1988 period of democratic reform in South Korea created greater space for women in various public spheres. However, just as interestingly, it also led to a reformulation of masculinist and patriarchal ideologies. This may be referred to as the rise of 'traditionalism'. Following a period of rapid industrialization, "Nostalgia for Korean tradition has mounted as material life increasingly resembles that of the United States" (Moon 2002: 485). Within such traditionalism, women came to seen as "repositories" of Korean culture, a perspective "that continues to deprive them of their subjectivity as active citizens" (2002: 487) whose

identities change with across time. This aspect has, of course, been influentially explored for the Indian context by Partha Chatterjee in his interrogation of the colonial discourse of "women as tradition" (Chatterjee 1993). "The politics of reinventing patriarchal traditions and reducing women to its mere repository is not conducive," Moon points out, "to women's participation in civil society, since tradition dictates that women stay in their 'natural' place within the household" (Moon 2002: 487).

The manner in which a community's body of customs can be part of its system of gendered power can be explored through looking at the institution of *guthi* among the Newar ethnic group in Nepal. *Guthis* are "place based associations that enable households to fulfill their social and religious obligations through group action" (Rankin 2003: 116). Household membership of a *guthi* is through senior male representatives and "commits individuals to social obligations" (Rankin 2003:116) such as taking part in religious rituals and mortuary rites along with other *guthi* members. The *guthi* system is fundamentally linked to the 'honour economy' of Newar society and it is seen as crucially important that members of different *guthis* fulfill their obligations to each other. To not do so would be to 'lose face'.

While *guthi* membership serves to define and entrench caste hierarchy – one should only marry within one's *guthi* in order to maintain caste 'purity' – it also functions to institute gender difference. Hence, women cannot be *direct* members of *guthis* but are so because they belong to the household. Further, since women are seen to embody forms of 'impurity' associated with menstruation and childbirth, they are excluded "from the highly valued ritual obligations of mortuary *guthis*" (Rankin 2003: 117). Indeed, women's participation in *guthi*-related activity is along lines that most clearly place them as inferior to men through carrying out tasks that the men are not obliged to. Hence, it is left to them to provide the labour of preparing offerings that are to be made at various *guthi*-related ritual occasions. So, while the 'honour' of *guthi* membership accrues to men, the burden of achieving *guthi*-obligations falls squarely on women.

In a discussion of the debate over *sati* during the colonial period (that led to the abolition of the practice in 1829), feminist historian Lata Mani has shown (1989) that, ultimately, the issue reduced to a conversation between colonial male rulers and their male subjects. So, whereas the British argued that the practice should be

banned because of its 'barbarity', Indians responded through a defence of their 'traditions'. Ironically, as Mani points out, this tradition was itself produced through colonial discourse. Further Sikata Banerjee (2005) has shown how "the interaction between the British and Indian colonial elite" (Banerjee 2005: 2) produced 'masculine Hinduism'. The echoes of this continue to reverberate in our own time. These have been fruitfully explored by scholars such as Morris Carstairs (1958) and, more recently, Joseph Alter (1992, 2011). Alter's writings on relationships between discourses of celibacy, somaticity, health, and disease have proved particularly fertile in exploring the place of masculinity within Indian modernity. Of course, the uses of religion and 'customary' justifications to foreground masculinist agendas are fairly evenly distributed across different contexts and the Hindu religion is not a special case.

## The gender of institutions

The historic division of social life as 'public' and 'private' has simultaneously entailed a division of *institutions* as public and private. And, along with this, there has developed a logic of the gender of such institutions. According to this logic, public institutions are the 'natural' preserve of men. Therefore, they are particularly sites of a variety of masculinist ideologies.

The kinds of questions we might ask here are of the following order: How is gendered power consolidated through civic associations such as clubs and societies that, either implicitly or explicitly, base themselves upon masculinist ideologies? How are the conjoined contexts of patriarchal privilege and masculinist ideals normalized through associations?

Legal institutions in the post-colonial state in South Asia are also significant sites for the unfolding of masculinist attitudes. In both India and Pakistan, 'honour crimes' are a significant context for exercise of control of female sexuality. Warraich (2005) notes that though instances of 'honour crimes' in Pakistan – as reported through multiple sources – are on the rise, rates of conviction are nominal. The Pakistani state's adoption of the British Penal Code of 1860 with its masculinist and patriarchal biases, the implicit endorsement by the contemporary legal system of customary attitudes towards women and the history of 'Islamization' under general Zia's rule have all contributed to the present state of affairs. So, in a case where an elderly man killed his much younger wife after

finding her in a 'compromising' position with another man, "the court did not criticise the practice of marrying young women to much older men . . . and failed to be appalled at the customary conduct of the woman's own family" – who had joined in the attack on her and subsequently disowned her body – rather considering this "proof" of the "disgrace brought by her to the whole family by her conduct" (Warraich 2005: 96). Judges, as Patricia Uberoi points out for India, "bring to their interpretation of the law very masculinist sex-role stereotypes while manifestly upholding the cause of women" (Uberoi 1995: 321).

In addition, the manner in which gender power is consolidated through a variety of institutions – such as schools, clubs, and societies – that base themselves upon and reproduce masculinist ideologies has been an important area of research. In her study of a military school in Maharashtra, Vérnoque Benei (building upon both Joseph Alter's and R. W. Connell's works) makes an interesting point regarding the life of old concepts within contemporary Indian modernity. Hence, she says, "at first glance it could be argued that the Pratinagar military school plays the classic role of a site where young boys are initiated into the predominant constraints and expectations of hegemonic masculinity" (Benei 2008: 238). However, Benei goes on to say, "at the Sainik School . . . the body politic under construction contained more or less hidden the seeds of another potentiality, a potentiality most apparent when envisaging masculinity – and gender – in the plural" (2008: 238). Benei points out that, in fact, the version of masculinity inculcated among boys at the school is one based on *Brahmacharya* celibacy (248); hence masculinity is imagined as a relationship: that is, the manner in which maleness is defined relates also to "cultivating 'femaleness'" (Benei 2008: 238).

Another significant institutional site where cultures of masculinity are established and elaborated consist of civic associations such as clubs and societies. A study that explored neighbourhood associations in Kolkata points out that, "The masculinist spaces of the boy's clubs that are part of every city neighbourhood and small locality give the city of Kolkata a distinctive character" (Chopra 2007: 194). "The all-male institutions", as Chopra further points out, "are accorded an authorized existence; in turn, their members contribute to the collective life of the neighbourhood" (2007: 194). The clubs escape the censure that usually comes the way of 'unproductive' activities such as 'hanging out' because of the great

significance attached to their role as contributors to community life. "It seemed clear", as Chopra says, "that the entire community recognized the club as a significant institution and was willing to donate valuable resources, like land and money, to establish the club and keep it going" (2007: 198); such is the value that is placed, we might conclude, on the pedagogy of masculinity. What is important to note is that associational forms such as the neighbourhood clubs of Kolkata, though different in form from institutions such as the judiciary and schools, constitute a contiguous and overlapping formation within which circulate mutually reinforcing ideas of gender relations and the place of men within them.

## Patriarchy, masculinities, and sexualities

Since masculinity is not simply a biological state but an unstable process and a state that has to constantly be striven towards, this instability means that men have to constantly prove their manhood in various social spheres, including their sexual lives. 'Performance' therefore becomes the cornerstone of men's sexual practices and yet another arena that men have to negotiate within the context of experiencing power. One aspect of masculine performance concerns the suppression of non-heteronormative and their incorporation into a monolithic nationalist myth of heteronormativity. The history of colonial and post-colonial modernity in the region is, in fact, one of suppression and marginalization of gender and sexual identities that did not (or do not) live up to hypermasculinist ideals that were produced through a collaboration between colonial discourse and a native elite that aspired to emulate colonial norms (Omissi 1991; Sinha 1997).

Sexual violence is another significant context of understanding masculinist identity politics. Rape, it has been recognized is more than a physical act: it is also a means of perpetuating symbolic violence that seeks to establish the superiority of masculine identity. Further, in cases of rape in situations of war and other conflict, the act also seeks to assert that the superiority of the rapist's group over that of the group to which the raped women belong. This relates to the idea that if men are not able to 'protect' the 'honour' of 'their' women, then it is their own honour that has been slighted. Increasingly, feminist thinkers have argued that the manner in which we think about rape – as 'lost honour', for example – is itself

problematic, as it significantly draws upon *male* notions of honour. Nivedita Menon suggests that simultaneously as we seek to prevent and punish crimes of honour, we must also seek to problematize the notion that "rape is the worst thing that can happen to a woman." According to Menon, we must question the "*meaning* of rape" itself (Menon 2004: 156; original emphasis). For, she says, "rape as violation" is not only a feminist understanding, it is perfectly compatible with patriarchal and sexist notions of women's bodies and our sexuality (Menon 2004: 159). The meanings of rape that circulate among *men* significantly define the lives of those who have suffered the outrage and a significant task of masculinity studies lies in uncovering such meanings in order to supplement the feminist task of subverting their import and fracturing their power.

Finally in this context, the manner in which female sexuality is conceptualized stands in a direct relationship to the ways in which male sexuality is imagined. So, for example, 'good' and 'bad' women in Indian cinema have (though such representations are changing) historically been represented as the self-sacrificing wife and sexless mother and the promiscuous 'vamp', respectively. The man who has multiple partners is, on the hand, frequently represented as 'virile' and someone who embodies 'genuine' masculinity.

It is crucial, as Joseph Alter (2011) points out, that "the outward expressions of masculinity – personal, political and medical" is also about "an inward orientation concerning the essence of sex and sexual fluid" (2011: 3). Once we come to recognize the conjoined nature of masculinity and sexuality, we are able to explore cultures of masculinity across a number of registers of social life. This is an approach that has provided significant scholarly dividends, allowing for rich reflections on a wide variety of topics, including nationalism, heteronormativity, the politics of caste, gendered violence, and religious identities; to explore the relationship between masculinity and sexuality is to think about ideas of masculine "self-expression and self-making" (Osella and Osella 2006: 122). That is to say:

> The construction of sexuality, and the discourses that gather around it, have a fundamental connection with the entire gamut of processes cultural, economic, political, 'global' – with which people must engage and sexuality becomes one of the many sites around which social and cultural ideas can be expressed.
>
> (Srivastava 2004: 25)

"Where heterosexuality – marriage, the normative household – is figured as compulsory, gender and sexuality", Osella and Osella point out, "may be drawn strongly together" (2006: 206). In everyday discourse, masculine sexuality has, almost axiomatically, come to be articulated through the vocabulary of heterosexuality and masculinity itself is interpreted as heterosexual behaviour. In this way, male homosexuality came to be identified as 'not really masculine', thereby producing one of the significant hierarchies of masculinity. It is this sexual hierarchy that found play in nineteenth-century debates over Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code of 1861 that provided penalties for 'unnatural sex'. If we consider the case of societies which "lack the category 'homosexual' " (Herdt 1999: 16), such as the Sambia of Papua New Guinea, however, the significance of the different ways in which sexuality and masculinity are imbricated becomes more obvious; the 'feminine man' may not exist in such societies in the same way that he finds representation in others where the category has taken hold (Foucault 1990).

One of the emphatic ways in which sexuality and masculinity become conjoined for the Indian context relates to the notion of 'semen anxiety', where semen is treated as an 'essential fluid' whose 'wastage' has deleterious effects upon masculine capacities. The discourse of semen anxiety has produced its own categories of masculinity as well as narratives of anxiety about loss of manhood. The various critiques of this concept (John and Nair 1998; Osella and Osella 2002; Alter 2011; Srivastava 2004, for example) have provided ample evidence of the specific ways in which sexual notions produce gendered (masculine) selves.

I have already noted the different kinds of relationships between masculinity, sexuality (male and female) and sexual violence. The broader context of such violence needs to be located in deeper histories of modernity. It is in this vein that scholars have explored the connections between masculinity and sexuality in contexts as diverse as the making of communal politics through the figure of the lascivious and threatening Muslim male (Blom Hansen 1999; Sethi 2002; Srivastava 2004; Gupta 2001); the "celibate Hindu hero" (Chakravarty 1998); caste politics and birth control debates (Anandhi 1998); marriage, sexuality, and "social reform" (Kodoth 2003); masculinity, sexuality, and domestic labour (Chopra 2006); masculinity, sexuality, and class (George 2006); and masculinity, sexuality, and nationalism (Derné 2000).

## Conclusion

A feminist understanding of masculine cultures across different registers illuminates a number of contexts interaction that, in turn, tell us something about the ways in which cultures of sociality and power unfold. Masculinity studies, thus formulated, is the site of both an examination of the quotidian processes of producing men as the universal subject of history as well as a "theory of practice" (Bourdieu 1972/1995) that seeks to uncover the consolidation of structures of power through quotidian acts. Further, it is also a theory of self-practice. That is to say, masculinity studies constitutes an examination of the structures of power within which the interrogators might themselves be located. This aspect lies at the heart of the necessarily fraught – but productive – relationship between it and feminist theory and politics. The self-practice, as I refer to it, can only, however, become political practice through building upon the various scholarly and activist contexts outlined in this chapter. It is this that separates critical masculinity studies from inward-focus men's studies and the various prescriptions and exhortations for men to 'improve' themselves through discovering their 'inner' selves.

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Chapter 3

# Men in women's studies

## A case study

*Zaid Al Baset and Romit Chowdhury*

### Introduction

The pursuit of feminist studies in universities necessarily requires negotiations against the patriarchal structures that frame higher education. Institutional histories of women's studies in India and efforts to mainstream feminist ideas in the academy document the difficult labour of women towards navigating these constraints. Some of this literature briefly mentions the part played by men – primarily occupying key administrative positions – in furthering these agendas. Kusum Dutta (2011: 45) notes, for instance, that:

> To combat opposition to the introduction of Women's Studies in higher education, emerging from deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes and structures, proponents of Women's Studies, including some men in crucial positions, such as J.P. Nayak, AsokMitra, B.N. Ganguli, M.N. Srinivas, B. Shivaramayya, and Iqbal Narayan decided to form the Indian Association of Women's Studies in 1982.

The scope of this literature on the history of women's studies in India does not allow a sustained investigation of men's motivations for support and the nature of their engagement with the institutionalization of feminist politics.

This chapter traces men's place in this history by focusing on a women's studies department in eastern India. The chapter is structured as a response to the following questions: What roles did men essay in the formation and running of women's studies? What motivated their association and what obstacles did they confront in the process? What factors prompt and sustain men's attachment to

feminism? In answering these questions, we offer an understanding of masculinity and sexual politics in pro-feminist endeavours in the university. Such an effort contributes to existing scholarship on the contradictions of men's participation in women's, gender, and feminist studies courses at the college and university levels (Alilunas 2011; Guckenheimer and Schmidt 2013). We must clarify that this project of uncovering male support of women's studies runs the risk of creating heroes out of particular male figures and implicitly supplanting the foundational efforts of women to establish women's studies in India. To avoid this slippage we have anonymized both the department in which we conducted field research and the men and women we interviewed. We highlight, instead, the conditions which impel men's pro-feminism and the learnings we might be able to generalize from this about feminist alliance-building in university spaces.

## Women narrate male support

Since its inception, the Centre of Women's Studies[1] (henceforth CWS) at this eastern Indian university has enlisted male participation and support in its administrative and academic endeavours. In the initial years of the development of women's studies, there was a consensus that these centres should collaborate actively with other departments in the university to remedy the androcentrism of mainstream disciplines. Avoiding the Western model of women's studies as a separate discipline and fearing the intellectual ghettoization of women in the Indian university, women's studies centres were expected to redress 'the women's question' in knowledge production and learning within all disciplines in the university (Pappu 2002; John 2008; Dutta 2011). Women's studies centres, unlike in most mainstream departments, had the additional responsibility of outreach activity and intervention in public policy to empower women in society.

In order to narrate the story of men's engagement with CWS, we conducted interviews with the administrative heads of the centre, and women faculty members from other departments associated with it. We also spoke to male scholars and administrative staff who have worked closely with CWS. In addition to the interviews, a detailed study of all newsletters of the centre was undertaken to explore the nature and extent of involvement of men in CWS as researchers, teachers, students, and administrative staff. We conducted a total of 14 in-depth interviews.

According to Professor Tilotama Mukherjee (who is in her early-seventies and erstwhile head of CWS), the enthusiasm generated for women's issues following the publication of the *Towards Equality* report began to impact this university from the late 1970s. She remembers this period as one of great political turmoil and states:

> At that time the women's movement grew very strong; the kind of antagonism, we now find between Autonomous Women's Organizations (AWO) and organizations associated with political parties was not there. Both political organizations and AWO were active, involved, in the forefront, visible as a united force.[2] When this was happening we all felt it is important to know the theoretical side, the analytical side, the discursive side of our experience as activists. This gave women's studies a real thrust forward.
>
> (Interview with Tilotama Mukherjee, 27 May 2016)

Speaking about the establishment of CWS as an "interdisciplinary space of interaction", she mentions the supportive role of the then (male) vice-chancellor. In the years which followed, she describes men who supported women's studies in the university as "always a minority, a very vocal and visible minority" and asserts that "one cannot think of women's studies without thinking of (our) male colleagues from the departments of humanities and social sciences."

Dr Sukanya Bhattacharya (in her late forties), who joined a humanities department in the university in the late 1990s and has been closely associated with CWS two years after joining, told us, "CWS was dominated by women but some men were fixtures like Upal Dasgupta . . . One didn't think of men being odd that they were participating in the women's studies enterprise" (interview with Sukanya Bhattacharya, 19 April 2016). She states that in the initial decade of the CWS, there was less of professionalization and more of voluntarism and male faculty members from various humanities departments and even the sciences were involved. She emphasizes the role the founding head played in inviting male scholars, lecturers, and researchers to the centre. Suhrita Chaudhuri (in her late sixties), an erstwhile head of CWS, characterizes male support of women's studies a little differently. She notes:

> As far as teaching is concerned, or meetings, I often tried to get them to come regularly, but when they did there was always a

> taking lightly – *tomar bhoye eshechi* (we came out of fear) – not taking it very seriously. It was quite fashionable to say that I am pro-feminism. Since we met on other occasions, socially and professionally, they thought it was a courtesy call.
>
> (Interview with Suhrita Chaudhuri, 9 May 2016)

Explicit in the narratives of the women feminists we spoke to is a distinction between male support of gender studies and men's feminist engagement with it. Professor Tilotama Mukherjee sums it up thus:

> Some men were actively engaged but very few. They were interested, friendly, and supportive but as far as taking it up themselves they were hesitant. Only a couple of them were truly engaged. That barrier was broken in later years. At that time there were only very few who would actively write on gender or do research.
>
> (Interview with Tilotama Mukherjee, 27 May 2016)

According to her, this hesitation, which continues to persist, can be attributed to the "mental ghettoization" of women's studies as something about women and something that women should do. It is worth thinking about this distinction between mere male support and male feminist engagement. By feminist engagement, we mean not simply a belief in gender equality but rather a durable practice towards reducing gender disparity in the domain of scholarship, activism, and everyday life. Male feminism is convincing when there is a sustained engagement with the many forms of gender inequity. Such involvement warrants being separated from ad-hoc forms of male support in the university, which may signify adherence to democratic liberal principles at best, or a paternalistic attitude at worst. Male feminist engagement at its very core demands reflection on male privilege and how this can be undone. It seems from the narratives recorded here that there has been a dearth in male feminist support in this sense. Nevertheless, the newsletters of CWS provide some evidence of men's engagement with women's studies and feminism. The editorial board of the newsletter has always had some male representation. From the very beginning of the establishment of the centre, male scholars have actively participated in workshops, conferences, talks, and symposiums organized in CWS. Keeping in mind the multi-disciplinary approach of women's

studies, the newsletter, especially issues published in the 1990s, had sections that detailed activities of other departments pertaining to gender issues. These sections included information about courses, conferences, workshops, and publications by faculty members of other departments in the humanities and social sciences, which had gender as a component. It provided a list of MPhil and PhD theses being undertaken in other departments addressing themes of gender/sexuality. Male students and faculty members feature on these lists prominently. It is worth mentioning that some male scholars whose specializations did not include feminism/gender offered supervisory support for MPhil and PhD dissertations on women-centred topics. The themes that men wrote on varied greatly: from exploring the work of lesser-known female writers to portrayal of women in literature and cinema across time periods, nationalities, and genres; from the Bengali middle-class women of the 19th century to women in panchayats in West Bengal. Discussions on masculinity were also conducted in CWS, often in connection with problems of communalism, censorship, and labour. Our interview narratives suggest that this kind of male representation in women's studies is largely an outcome of women using the institutional and social routines of the university to bolster the presence and spread of the woman question in academia.

From the interviews we gathered that there have always been male students, albeit a minority, who were interested in the field of women's studies. All our feminist interlocutors were able to recall particular male students and their enthusiasm for studying gender as well as feminist activism. Professor Tilotama Mukherjee told us, "At this university we have had a close connection with our students. At that time the semester system was not there. Teachers and students used to spend a lot of time together" (interview with Tilotama Mukherjee, 27 May 2016). She mentions the participation of male students in a play she wrote on the dowry system in India in the late 1980s. She also mentions a play on rape written by an illustrious woman student and performed by a man dressed as a woman. Sukanya Bhattacharya reiterated that at the humanities department where she was teaching courses on feminism and women's writing:

> I have always had male students interested not only in academics but also in activism. This university has had very many engaged men students, who are embedded in women's issues.

> I can't remember any time I didn't have male students, even though they are a minority. Not just having them in class but also having them participate in conversations both inside and outside class.
>
> (Interview with Sukanya Bhattacharya, 19 April 2016)

After the introduction of the semester system, many of the courses on gender became optional. The structuring of academic programmes, therefore, conditions students' freedom to participate in activities outside their immediate curriculum requirements. It appears that the semester system, in catering to students' interests, makes the study of gender a matter of individual preference. Sukanya alludes to the subtle discrimination that male students who opt for courses on feminism and queer theory have to face. She states:

> I have heard a lot of students reporting things like that especially about the queer studies course. Some students say they had to face flak at home and at university as well. There are fairly high levels of homophobia in the campus. Campuses are not pristine places.
>
> (Interview with Sukanya Bhattacharya, 19 April 2016)

Anindita Gupta (in her early fifties) who has been the head of CWS for the greater part of a decade, citing her teaching experiences, provides a rather comprehensive classification of male students who "trickle in and out" of the women's studies MPhil programme. She says, "One kind of men who we don't worry about are those who are here to do the MPhil just for an increment!" Another set of male students are those who do not get to study the subject of their choice and opt for women's studies. For Sen, these students have some level of engagement that is an extension of their general academic work. She informs us that, "Some men who come to CWS want to engage with the politics and the curriculum. Others come with expectations and then drop out." She adds further, "Some come thinking oppressed women should be uplifted. They are the ones who come thinking it is a soft option." Sen also emphasizes the problem of male students who would prefer a vernacular pedagogy and laments the lack of women's studies material in Bangla (interview with Anindita Gupta, 17 May 2016).

In a similar vein, Professor Suhrita Chaudhuri told us:

> We had a male student in the MPhil; I still feel very bad thinking about this. He was a Muslim student from Boshirhat, he was physically disabled, and had secured a place in the programme through reservation. It was a great challenge for him to commute to the city, and also to climb stairs, and he struggled academically because of language. He did not follow English very well. Nobody was willing to help him out with remedial teaching. He was very interested in women's issues, he said because he felt the women in his community are extremely oppressed. He came with great expectations. But receiving none of the help that he needed, he dropped out after a month's struggle. – Why didn't people help him out? – That was the community attitude, resentment towards reservations. Also women's studies people often have this complex where they say, "Oh, women's studies is that easy you think? Don't think it can be an easy option."
>
> (Interview with Suhrita Chaudhuri, 9 May 2016)

A host of reasons bring men to women's studies, of which commitment to feminist politics is merely one. The narrative excerpted here highlights the conditions that may cause this rare commitment to wane. It is also a useful reminder that feminist institutional building must proceed by taking into account the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, religion, ability, language, and region. Apart from the stigma attached to minorities, and the aforementioned institutional gaps, Suhrita Chaudhuri alerts us to other pragmatic factors that may dissuade men from joining women's studies:

> In our country, there is an overall scarcity. You don't have the luxury to go into the liberal arts; everything has to be utilitarian, productive. Community recognition does not come if you are a freelancer. I think career concerns stop men from coming into feminism/gender studies. Many are aware of the problem but do not directly address it in their writings. I think it will take time for men to come to feminism. It is not a permanent divide. Also, the sheer anger at being victimized; that itself is a great provocation for many women, which perhaps men don't have.

Our interlocutors rehearse a history of cooperation and commitment within the university administration. Sukanya Bhattacharya

says, "It's not that they [the administration] don't want to be supportive or there is a larger patriarchal plan; laziness, apathy are difficult to cut through." She recounts an instance of bureaucratic ritualism involved in procuring sanitary napkins for women in the university following student agitation for the same.

Initially the registrar of the university could not bring himself to use the words "sanitary napkin" and referred to it as "*oi jinesh* (that thing)" (interview with Sukanya Bhattacharya, 19 April 2016). Following a report by the enquiry committee into what prompted the agitations, headed by a man, it was decided to stock sanitary napkins inside the university campus. The procedure to do so was both illogical and hilarious. Sukanya was asked by the registrar to get a recommendation letter from the university doctor stating that female students need such things! When she approached the doctor he said this is not a medical issue that needs his certification. Yet the letter was written and they were finally told that a store had been stocked with sanitary napkins. In Sukanya's estimate of this situation, she counters the charge that university administration is inherently patriarchal by arguing that it may not necessarily be blind to issues of gender but simply be lazy and resistant to change. To our mind, such an indulgent reading overlooks how pervasive apathy to women's issues is in the university.

However, most women feminists who we spoke to named some men in the administration who were particularly sensitive to the administrative needs of CWS. Professor Tilotama Mukherjee told us:

> When you are head you expect cooperation from the administration- and fortunately for us the administration in this university has been very cooperative, right from VC and registrar to finance officer. When I became head, finances were at an ebb, UGC was not releasing funds . . . When I went to the admin they told me that whatever your budget is you can spend the money, we will allow you to spend it from university funds. This enabled us to carry out the work but of course they didn't do it as special privilege to CWS.
>
> (Interview with Tilotama Mukherjee, 27 May 2016)

Professor Chaudhuri also reiterates the supportive role of the financial officer in issuing overdrafts which, according to her, had far-reaching consequences for the functioning of all centres in the university. Here, again, apart from the specific vice-chancellors,

registrars, and financial officers who were mentioned as gender-sensitive, a general cooperative stance of the administration cannot be read as male pro-feminism.

The evolution of the CWS in the last two decades has evoked mixed responses. While there has been greater professionalization of the CWS, it has come at a loss of a certain effervescence that those associated with the centre characterize in interesting ways. Sukanya Bhattacharya exclaims,

> This whole professionalization and institutionalization has taken the fun out of it. Earlier when we went to women's studies, we really thought it was a fun space to go into, somehow we were playing truant, that slightly innocent pleasure of participating in a discipline that is really not my own discipline but actually I feel it is. That pleasure is lost. When I taught classes in women's studies, I thought this is a holiday! It is difficult to describe that excitement.
>
> (Interview with Sukanya Bhattacharya, 19 April 2016)

The loss is not merely of the intense camaraderie and friendships that characterized the early years but also active participation which CWS could enlist from various departments. As Suhrita Chaudhuri puts it:

> CWS now has a geographical alienation. That place is physically alienating because it is in a far corner of the campus. Earlier we were at the heart of the campus, even if the space was cramped. It was impossible to avoid physically. You had to see what was going on in women's studies. But now those who are not directly associated don't know what women's studies is, where it is. It has become an island. Very soon people included gender in their own disciplines. So the need to travel to another department to teach gender lessened. With the new head, all these research projects came in and many people were employed in these projects. They were so hard pressed for time to deliver, it was not possible for them to hang out at canteens and interact with other people on the university that lead to both an insularity and corporatization of the school.
>
> (Interview with Suhrita Chaudhuri, 9 May 2016)

These narratives suggest that what might have happened in the last decade is a diminution in conversation among different departments in the university on women's studies. The discomfort that

these narratives register about the new cultural and geographical insularity of the CWS is thought to be at variance with some of the stated goals with which the project of women's studies began, namely outreach and cross-disciplinary exchanges within the university. The particular value of women's studies being a 'fun space' appears to be predicated on its capacity to foster wider academic networks. A rewarding outcome of this is that work in CWS was experienced as leisure, against the odds of setting up a new academic centre. As Upal Dasgupta, erstwhile publication officer at CWS says, "From the time I used to work in CWS, it is now a very changed women's studies." He remembers fondly a time when space was a crunch and work was haphazard in some ways, but the pleasures of working for CWS were immense: "Broken panes, rains lashing the rooms, snakes coming in. I have worked in those conditions. But these are pleasurable memories" (Interview with Upal Dasgupta, 2 May 2016). The newsletters attest to some extent the repercussions of this perceived transformation in the institutional culture of CWS.

This transformation of CWS was an outcome of broader changes in the rules and regulations of the state university system. Creation of tenured positions in the department meant that having qualifications in women's studies took precedence over the network of personal ties. The mainstreaming of gender concerns in the humanities and social sciences presented a contradiction to the goals of interdisciplinarity. Once CWS began to offer its own academic programmes, the issue of the distinctiveness of women's studies as a discipline began to emerge. This coupled with the general reluctance of mainstream 'traditional' departments to recruit scholars and researchers trained in women's studies has prompted the alleged insularity of CWS. Anindita Gupta, who played an important role in development of the CWS from a space of ad-hoc cooperation to a Centre with full-time faculty positions, academic programmes, and research projects, alerted us to these concerns, asserting that the earlier situation could not have been a permanent one. She contends that the older generation of women's studies does not acknowledge these tensions that beset CWS, especially from 2000 onwards.

These changes are significant from the point of view of men's participation in women's studies because they connote a shift in the terms of engagement with it. As mentioned earlier, the women feminists we spoke to distinguish between men's support of women's studies and their active involvement in feminist politics. We would argue that the alleged lack of fun in the present scenario may not

invite casual encouragements from men as in the older days, but demands a professional commitment to the endeavour of women's studies. The availability of new sources of funding for women's studies research projects and fellowships has allowed it to be seen by both men and women as a viable career choice.

The following segment of the chapter considers narratives of men who have had long-term professional involvement in CWS to further explicate men's pro-feminism.

## Why feminism?

By his own admission, Agniva Ghosh's decision to leave literary studies – in which he had taken a master's degree – to join women's studies at the research level was not very well thought out. (He is 37-years-old, married, currently a guest faculty at CWS.) However, as he spoke about his educational choices, it seemed that his taking up women's studies was a considered decision:

> Looking back, my decision to enroll in a women's studies programme seems irrational. The kind of Literary Studies I was in at the time is a closed space, with no job security, very few academic jobs. So professionally, women's studies offered me a new possibility. Back in 2005, I was interested in joining something new, and getting out of a place that was clearly blocked for me. So it was not a very deliberate or conscious choice made after comparing the two disciplines. I just wanted to move out of the claustrophobia of a familiar discipline to an area that was new and would give me a liberal exposure to multiple issues. I was interested in gender, which came from my training in literature, especially African literatures.
>
> (Interview with Agniva Ghosh, 5 May 2016)

As Agniva's interview proceeded, it made it difficult for us to think of his motivations for joining women's studies simply as a pragmatic career move. Aspects of his life had made him sensitive to gender as an organizing principle of social life, and this awareness contributed to the attraction that the discipline of women's studies held for him:

> At the back of my mind was my mother's experience, who I lost when I was very young. She was an orphan and she lived much of her life as a boarder in an NGO for women. I heard about her growing up without support and the difficulties she faced

> as a young woman. I must have unconsciously connected these memories with the issues I was reading as part of my training in literature. I was aware of communities that had been left behind. This pushed me towards women's studies. The atmosphere here was politically charged; that attracted me.

The connection which he established between his mother's struggles and the marginality of particular social groups allowed a politically inflected reading of the personal. Sagnik Dutta (in his early forties, who teaches literature in an undergraduate college and wrote his PhD dissertation on women war poets) recalls:

> Since my mom suffered a lot, in domestic circumstances, my feminism is rooted there. She was a victim of Partition, displacement; she is erudite, comes from an elite family but could never really realize her dreams, utilize her potential. That grievance I absorbed consciously or unconsciously from her. Given her marginalization the anger was also there. In that context I became the spokesperson for feminism.
>
> (Interview with Sagnik Dutta, 14 May 2016)

This recognition of familial women's disadvantages being a social problem and not merely a personal matter is to be found in the narratives of several pro-feminist men (see also Bandyopadhyay 2015). In Agniva's case, it also prompted the research themes that he took up subsequently as a student in the department. Thus, as he began working on a project on family photographs of middle-class Bengali women, he remained aware that:

> Something that haunted me from my childhood is that I never saw photographs of my mother as a young woman. This strongly motivated my research. I could not show my friends photographs of my mother, even though this was a part of middle-class notions of memory and family.

The appreciation of women's marginality necessarily demands a concomitant awareness of male privilege. Saptarshi Bhadra (50-years-old, married), who wrote his doctoral dissertation in feminist philosophy and teaches feminism to university students, remembers:

> For me there was a certain liberal sense of injustice which if somebody is even a little perceptive one can see, especially in

> the family; the experience of my mother and other women in the extended family . . . Also as a child, I noticed the special treatment given to me by my grandparents, viz. my cousin sisters. I enjoyed it. But I also realized it is unfair.
>
> (Interview with Saptarshi Bhadra, 11 June 2016)

It is relevant to remark here that although a political interpretation of the personal underpins a number of men's story of allegiance to feminism, we encountered other men associated with this women's studies centre who have done feminist work without necessarily thinking of it in political terms and those whose commitment to feminism does not connect immediately to their experiences of family living. Their provocations for participating in feminist projects provide revealing commentary on the nature of political work generally, and attachment to feminist politics in particular. Shantanu Sen (50-years-old, married, teaches literature at the university level) wrote on women novelists who were considered bestsellers in the late 19th century in England, for his PhD. He told us:

> Doing a doctoral dissertation on the interface between women and literature, I suppose I did think it was important to redress the balance of scholarship on women and gender; but I don't want to make any excessive claims on behalf of that agenda. I initially thought of studying how female friendships shape women's writings; at the time, I thought it was important for any socially progressive person to be concerned about women's lives. This theme then transformed into the one on women bestselling novelists. I received a lot of encouragement from senior women scholars associated with the Centre for Women's Studies, who frequently gave me references pertaining to this research.
>
> (Interview with Shantanu Sen, 6 May 2016)

Upal Dasgupta, who was associated with the centre for a decade as a publications' officer, working on reprints of women's writings, recalls:

> I passed my master's and then had to work because there were financial strains at home. I could not do a higher degree. I had to work. My teacher had told me of this job and I applied. Our aim was to produce a standard text of lost writings by women.

> I know nothing about feminist studies. But if I am told to make a rare piece of writing by a woman presentable to a contemporary audience, I can do that. I can find out publication dates, incidental notes, additional material, see if there are any relevant laws at the time. I enjoyed this work very much.
>
> (Interview with Upal Dasgupta, 2 May 2016)

His presence in a women-centred work environment is, therefore, simply incidental rather than a political obligation. We asked Upal if this job was like any other for him, or it held any particular draw:

> This wasn't just a job for me, like a Writer's Building job. Our salaries were so poor! People will laugh now to hear the figures. In the early 90s, I was paid Rs 1,200 per month. Gradually it became 8,000, then 10,000. It was not a mechanical job at all for me. I did think about the content of the work, thought about how a 'gharana' [canon] could be created with writers, links made between the works of these women writers.
>
> (Interview with Upal Dasgupta, 2 May 2016)

For some men, their investment in feminist labour rests not on ideas of gender justice but on a general work ethic and the pleasures which particular professional tasks afford. Even though they may not be conscious of feminist concerns, their labour in a women-centred work environment has feminist effects – if tenuous – on both the institutional life of the university as well as on these men's lives outside it.

The patriarchal imperative of male breadwinning might have compelled Upal's taking up a job in a women's studies centre but in discharging his professional responsibilities he was, tangentially, made aware of the politics of gender which govern literary writing in particular and social life in general.

## Student experiences

Men's presence in the feminist classroom as students evokes a variety of responses. While some women facilitators consider male students a threat to the safe space women need to articulate their experiences, others might treat them as a representative male voice. Still others are either curious or suspicious about such male

participation and often make assumptions about their (homo) sexuality (Alilunas 2011). The defensiveness and accusatory interventions of hegemonic forms of masculinity in the classroom, on the other hand, frequently interrupt feminist conversation (Guckenheimer and Schmidt 2013). This sub-section of our chapter queries the various interpellations of gender through which men are constituted in the course of their involvement as students in a feminist studies department.

Researching women's lives as a heterosexual man threw up a number of quandaries for Agniva. As he immersed himself in the curriculum he was repeatedly struck by the foundational place accorded to women's experiences in the discipline. Even as feminist interpretations of social life inspired him intellectually, he was simultaneously troubled by the thought that his sexed body and his male gender identity might interrupt, if not hinder, his learning and practice as a scholar. This primarily intellectual concern assumed a practical dimension when the results of his first semester examination were announced and a woman classmate lodged a formal complaint to the head of the institution about him having secured the highest grades. 'A man cannot be given top marks in a Women's Studies programme' was the certainty which underlay this written complaint. This experience unsettled Agniva deeply and made him aware of the peculiarity of a man's position in a women's studies department. He reflected on this experience thus:

> It made me aware of the identity that I was carrying, that in women's studies even if people don't show it, they might not really accept you because of your gender. In this institution, before me, no man was really academically interested in gender, and this was the first moment that I was made to realize that I am different. But then the senior staff members [all women] spoke to me and they told me I should not feel threatened or a sense of isolation because of this. It was reassuring but I was also anxious, wondering if I should continue in this programme, if there would always be this hatred towards me because I am a man.

Earlier in this chapter we have described the institutional gaps that play a part in men's withdrawal from women's studies. Here is an instance of institutional scaffolding that seeks to hold on to male support. Given the animosity which men generally display towards

feminism and the hostility which pro-feminist men sometimes receive, such reassuring gestures from established women feminists help forge rewarding political alliances with men. In the 11 years that Agniva has stayed in this women's studies department – as student, research coordinator, and guest faculty – several of these apprehensions have continued to accompany his working life. From various quarters of higher education – fellow students, colleagues, senior professors – he has had to grapple with taunts and suspicious glances:

> It is a sad experience for me that my presence here has led to several conspiracy theories among my colleagues. Why I have been selected in a set of academic programmes/fellowships related to women? That tension remains, but this sort of thing is there in other disciplines too.

Thus, if his securing highest grades in a women's studies course had provoked considerable opposition from a woman classmate, with the passage of time this accusation is now implicitly levelled at his success with obtaining research fellowships in the field. As his narrative suggests, Agniva has learnt to deal with this by generalizing his experience, namely that such peer envy is to be encountered in university life at large. Nevertheless, if he has managed to gain some control over handling the unease of his women colleagues, he seems less adept at dealing with stray sneers that are thrown his way.

> Many senior male professors who have helped me generally have laughed at my decision to become a 'man Friday' to women's studies. It's a tricky thing, because it comes from friends, so you don't know how to deal with this always. Generally I do not confront, but if it becomes a trend I react. As a man in women's studies you are definitely marked as feminine. When I tell my extended family or acquaintances in other professions about my involvement in feminism, they primarily think of me as a weak person. It is never shown clearly, but one can read signs.
>
> (Interview with Agniva Ghosh, 5 May 2016)

Reports of such jibes which feminize the pro-feminist man in university spaces came up also in our interviews with other men we

spoke to. Upal recounted how masculine spaces of sociability in the university are used to taunt pro-women men:

> There were some insensitive people who would say – "what do you do, sitting with women all day?" These were mostly people from the administration, who I would meet at the canteen. "You also! Involving yourself in such worthless work," these men would say. I would ignore all this. These people don't know how to say 'women's studies', they can only say 'omen studies'. I had to face such people, yes.
>
> (Interview with Upal Dasgupta, 2 May 2016)

The assertion of cultural capital – the men mispronounce the word 'women' – in a shared class and gender context becomes a way for Upal to tackle sneers from other men about his involvement in research and writing on women. It also provides another example of the general misogynist climate of universities.

Other difficulties that men in women's studies face range from the anxiety about finding a tenured faculty position in the department to their work being taken seriously by other scholars. Saptarshi told us:

> I've faced this allegation that you are doing feminist theory because that is 'hot' in the market currently. So you are cashing in on trends in the academic market. I generally laugh it off because it is impossible to reason with such a public. From male colleagues, I have got a sense that my theoretical work is not taken seriously because I foreground feminist ideas. So the idea is that he does feminism, not real theory.
>
> (Interview with Saptarshi Bhadra, 11 June 2016)

Saptarshi also notes a double-bind to men's involvement in feminist teaching/research and explains that there is a perceived novelty to men's participation in feminist endeavours and hence men are welcomed; but men are also under suspicion as men. Agniva is confident that a woman applicant will always be favoured over a male candidate. His ambivalence towards this situation captures some of the intellectual complexities that men who do feminist studies have to work out:

> A tenured job in women's studies is very difficult for a man to get. What do I feel about this? Difficult for me to answer: I know that to pursue the emancipatory politics of feminism you need women as a constituency. But then when I place

> myself in this scenario, it is a confusing mixture of many emotions that mark out my anxieties. I ask why only women? Not all feminist philosophies have said that only women can do feminism and women's studies. So I ask myself after having spent 10 years doing women's studies, can a biological female do better research than me simply on account of her sex?
>
> (Interview with Agniva Ghosh, 5 May 2016)

Some studies of men's attendance in feminist courses have suggested that their 'minority experience' in the classroom and feelings of otherness which this produces can potentially lead men to anti-patriarchal understandings of social relations (Miner 1994). From the interviews which we conducted, we learnt that men's counter-hegemonic interpretations of gender need not always proceed from their own minority experience. Saptarshi remembers beginning to read literature from a rather young age and says:

> I think reading Tagore's stories from the time I was 12/13-years-old played a major part in alerting me to women's situation within the family. The finer nuances of that situation might have escaped me as a man had I not been exposed to Tagore's writings on women and family.
>
> (Interview with Saptarshi Bhadra, 11 June 2016)

Sagnik makes a passionate appeal on behalf of creative thinking in cross-gender identification:

> Genuine understanding of another gender can also be very spontaneous. When a person works creatively, they should not think about gender as a hurdle. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility of reinforcing traditional stereotypes. But authenticity of experience and feelings can also be imagined, as in the case of transgender women identifying with biological females. That creative energy has to be acknowledged.
>
> (Interview with Sagnik Dutta, 14 May 2016)

In the narratives which we got from men, it seemed that disagreements over other political issues sometimes disrupts men's association with the daily functioning of centres of women's studies, if not their broader commitment to feminist values. Shantanu confesses:

> I was very disappointed with the Centre for Women's Studies during the Birati mass rape case in 1990. When as students

> some of us approached the department for organizing protests and public awareness initiatives, they just said no. This had to do with the then head's proximity to the ruling government. I think many of us would have been happier to see a more activist role on the part of women's studies. But I am ready to admit that perhaps that is an unrealistic expectation; it is an academic department after all.
>
> (Interview with Shantanu Sen, 6 May 2016)

Shantanu's disenchantment with the leadership of women's studies, therefore, relates to the difficult question of the discipline linking knowledge and action, an issue that has animated debates about the discipline in both India and internationally (Sue Lees 1991; Rege 2011). After submitting his doctoral dissertation, Shantanu has not researched questions of gender. He now relates his interest in gender studies as part of a broader commitment to marginalized groups and strongly believes that the study of women, gender, and sexuality cannot be contained within a discipline but has to be part of the basic vocabulary of any university/college teacher. He credits the general atmosphere of activism around social issues prevailing in the university in the late 1980s for bringing him to key feminist texts, such as those by Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, and Elaine Showalter, works that he engaged with collectively with his friends on campus.

## Pedagogy

Existing research on the teaching and learning of feminism demonstrates that women faculty are frequently read as angry, anti-male, and ideologically driven (Laube et al. 2007), whereas men teachers are likely to be seen by students as unbiased, objective, and hence "better feminists" (Edwards 2008). This sub-section considers the experiences of men who have taught feminist studies in the university we have been discussing in this chapter.

Although Shantanu no longer writes on women specifically, his interest in issues of marginality – including genders and sexualities – permeates his pedagogy. The syllabi of the courses he offers draws attention to how social inequalities inflect the production, circulation, reception, and teaching of literary texts and he structures his teaching around works by writers belonging to disenfranchised groups, texts which are traditionally not regarded as high literature. Yet, everyday concerns pertaining to teaching and learning in the

university on occasion beset the male teacher of feminism in specific ways. Agniva notes a felt need to be especially cautious during his teaching of feminism as a man. But instead of thinking of his awareness of masculinity as a burden he creatively reads it as a tool that enhances feminist pedagogy:

> I have felt that I need to be extra careful as a male teacher, in the sense that I need to be aware of my assumptions of masculinity, femininity which I carry in me. But I think that gives me an edge, because that self-reflexivity is essential to feminism. It can be tiring, but one can never take your bodily identity for granted. It is an anxiety that remains and it's a positive thing.
>
> (Interview with Agniva Ghosh, 5 May 2016)

The stress on caution recurred in other male scholars' narratives and echoed published reflections by male teachers of feminist ideas in Western contexts, who emphasize "mindfulness" (Lemons and Neumeister 2013) in processes of "pedagogy by the privileged" (Flood 2011). Saptarshi Bhadra believes:

> It is important for men to be especially cautious while criticizing feminist texts/ideas in one's writing and teaching. He should state upfront that he is with the cause and that this is an internal critique. There might well be a defense in men when engaging with feminism, so this caution is important to maintain for men. The awareness of privilege is vital.
>
> (Interview with Saptarshi Bhadra, 11 June 2016)

He also speaks of another dimension to male teachers' practice of feminism in the university classroom:

> I would teach concepts so that meant going into abstraction. I would sense that sometimes that would alienate students, and often the unspoken complaint was that there goes another man talking high theory. This would happen in my classes on feminism.
>
> (Interview with Saptarshi Bhadra, 11 June 2016)

Experiences such as these capture some of the stakes involved in men teaching the workings of male privilege to women. At one level, they highlight the tendency of some women colleagues to

read pro-feminist men in the classroom as "wolves in sheep's clothing" and their academic practice as "enlightened sexism" (Armato 2013). On another level, they also express the unease experienced by women students and scholars of feminism towards academic men's propensity to wield masculine authority over disciplines, thereby treating gender/sexuality studies as yet another terrain to gain 'mastery' over. If students who opt for queer studies courses are made vulnerable to charges of effeminacy, teachers of queer theory too hardly have impunity against homophobic slurs. Professor Soupayan Sinha (62-years-old), who was one of the first to introduce sexuality studies to the undergraduate curriculum in this university, remembers the causal assaults he was subjected to by his peers when he began teaching queer studies:

> "More than once I have been made to overhear comments like 'Such days have fallen on us that students are writing papers on ass-fucking'."
>
> (Interview with Soupayan Sinha, 24 April 2016)

The following encounter between male feminist pedagogue and female student has disturbed Agniva by far the most in his decade-long association with women's studies:

> Last year a woman student wanted to do her thesis under my supervision, on rape survivors. But ultimately she selected someone else to work with. I later found out that she was uncomfortable working on a thesis on rape with a male teacher. She didn't want to repeatedly discuss rape with a man. This really haunts me; it has been the hardest to reconcile to for me, in all these years. As a man in a women's studies department, I don't know how I ought to formulate my response. Maybe we need to think about what and how we teach women's studies in India.

Writing about men as agents of feminist scholarship, Michael Flood (2011) notes, "While there is growing acceptance of men when they sit among other students in the WGS [women and gender studies] classroom, there is greater unease when they are standing up at the front" as teachers. Agniva's experience adds another layer of complexity to thinking about the task of teaching feminism to young women as a man. The situation that he describes captures

the paradoxical entanglements of men's pro-feminist pedagogy. The body that is sexed male is here rendered inviolable and hence unable to access the experience of rape. This shows us the pitfalls of feminist orthopraxy which does not take note of developments in feminist and queer theory which simultaneously complicate the epistemic value of experience and embodiment.

## Conclusion

This chapter is a partial documentation of the feminist work which men attempt in the everyday spaces of the university; the objective has been to bring into view the institutional and political contexts in which men's feminisms are performed. The general devaluation of feminism in mainstream disciplines and the fact of male privilege often make male feminism suspicious in the university. An attendant purpose has been to provide an understanding of how men come to be attached to feminist institutions and the conditions in which this attachment wanes or strengthens. Our analysis reveals that the minority among men who support women's studies do so not after a sustained engagement with feminist studies; rather their support stems from a general espousal of liberal values of equality and social justice and sometimes merely pragmatic professional goals. This support is essential for mainstreaming certain broad feminist agendas such as encouraging focus on women, gender, and sexuality across disciplines and particularly making pedagogy and curricula sensitive to sexual politics. Among this group there is a smaller minority of pro-feminist men who have established a sustained intellectual/political/personal engagement with feminist ideas. This relationship, as we have shown is fraught by gender regimes which structure higher education in India.

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## Notes

1 Names of institutions and persons have been changed to protect their identities.

2 For a detailed analysis of the relationship between women's studies and the women's movement in India, see Mary E. John's (2008) 'Introduction' in *Women Studies in India: A Reader*.

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Chapter 4

# Doing and undoing feminism

## A jurisdictional journey

*Oishik Sircar*[1]

> To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.
>
> – Sara Ahmed (2017: 2)

### Boring into stuckness

The experience of starting to write this piece was boring. The activity of trying to provide an account of my journey as a male feminist jurisprudent felt taxing. Was there really this moment in my academic and political life when something happened and I turned feminist? Without an origin story, can I even begin? Isn't my desire for an origin story a reification of reproductive heteronormativity where I am trying to lay claim to a paternity of sorts to my feminist story? If I am unable to curate a story that offers an authoritative enough account of my relationship with feminism, is this exercise even worth pursuing? My inability to find such a moment made me feel stuck. Was I genuinely stuck, or was this a reflection of a male anxiety that my claim to being a feminist will risk exposure, and I will be judged to be lacking? Reading Lauren Berlant offered some direction. She described this condition in the process of writing as a "performance of stuckness":

> It is a record of where we got stuck on a question for long enough to do some research and write out the whole knot until the original passion and curiosity that made us want to try to say something about something got so detailed, buried, encrypted, and diluted that the energetic and risk-taking impulse became sealed and delivered in the form of a defense against thinking

> any more about it. Along the way, something might have happened to the scene the question stood for: or not.
>
> (Berlant 2014)

And then I thought, have I actually been stuck for long enough to even legitimately perform stuckness? The impetus then was to begin narrating a journey, in the hope that I will at some point arrive at stuckness, and that would possibly be a good place to be. My lawyer-self had to step in and play a role too. Margaret Davies's characterization of jurisprudence as "boring" provided a good dose of lubrication (Davies 2015: 1–4). That I felt the experience of writing this piece was boring could be read otherwise. Davies, counter-intuitively, speaks of jurisprudence as a boring philosophy, in that it seeks to bore: "to dig, to probe under the surface" (p. 4). The surface here is my academic skin of a male feminist jurisprudent. My boring journey is, in fact, more of a scratching exploration, and I will possibly get stuck prematurely in this piece, without digging deep enough. This incompleteness, I hope, never offers closure.

## The conduct of critique

The theme of this volume – 'men doing feminism'[2] – is a framing that can be read as celebratory, as well as contradictory. Depending on what strand of feminism one subscribes to, it might mark the moment of triumph for feminism that it now has converted-men on board, or it might be that fatalistic moment of defeat where feminism has now been infiltrated, co-opted and colonized by men. The framing can even sound like 'Capitalists doing Communism', or 'Fundamentalists doing Secularism', or their equally ironic inverted avatars. This continuous double-play of possibility and limitation, of glee and caution, is what feminism has meant for me – and here goes the laundry list – as a biological, practicing-heterosexual,[3] married, elite, and upper-caste man. For me, feminism has been a site of inspirational contradictions, or what David Shulman, albeit in a different context, has beautifully termed "dark hope" (Shulman 2007).

For me, the word 'men' in the title of the theme is not merely a signifier of a conservative biologism (Fausto-Sterling 1987, 2000, 2012). Although, I carry some discomfort in the connection that the theme might suggest between identity and ideology, I cannot deny the deep ideological and material performance of privilege

that I embody and enact as a cis-gendered man doing feminism. It is this embodiment and enactment of contradictions, being the recipient of privileges of this hetero-patriarchal-bourgeois-*Savarna* social order, and at the same time being embedded in struggles against that very order, is what learning from and living with feminism has meant for me.

'Doing', another word in the theme, is of much significance in this regard. To *do* feminism for me is the training in a certain kind of conduct – not in the instrumentalist sense of etiquette, civility, or good behaviour (what gets pathetically referred to as chivalry), but the practice of an ethic of responsibility (Spivak 1994: 19–64), not responsibilization (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 104–25). This distinction is crucial to the practice of feminism by men, especially at a time when the emergence of 'Feminism Lite' (Loewenstein 2014) has attained the status of self-congratulatory commonsense and 'Hashtag Feminism' (Loza 2014) has become the *lingua franca* of ostensibly progressive public engagement on social media as well as in the academy.

Responsibilization privileges privatized conduct of political correctness as a form of self-governance that is incentivized by the promise of membership into the patronage markets of progressive and sexist men, or to draw on Rebecca Solnit, into the "mansplaining" club (Solnit 2014: 1–16). For me, an ethic of responsibility is not only a cerebral idea but also a corporeal practice that takes seriously the limits of my authority to practice critique as a male feminist legal scholar. As Amita Dhanda and Archana Parashar have noted:

> While the knowledge and power nexus is now well established, it is equally important to make explicit the nexus of power and responsibility. Legal scholars who theorise the law have the power to constitute valid legal knowledge. Necessarily, they ought to take responsibility for the consequences that flow from their theories.
>
> (Dhanda and Parashar 2009: xii)

Thus, I'm not so much concerned with the capacity question: are men capable of being feminists? Rather, I am interested in the quotidian and relational concerns that animate the practice of feminism by men. What does it mean for a man to *conduct* oneself as a feminist?[4] It is this question that I will reflect on in this essay – from

what Paul Cilliers would call a "modest position" that acknowledges the "limitations of our understanding of this world" (Cilliers 2005: 256) – fully aware that as a man, waxing eloquent on being a feminist in many ways can be a self-serving exercise that can very well perpetuate a troubling binary between good and bad masculinities, and good and bad feminists. Which is why I will not treat feminism as a virtue that men who identify themselves as such and practice it, possess. I will think of feminism as a "sweaty concept" (Ahmed 2017: 12–13) that repeatedly trains me in ways of making sense of a fraught world and living in it by taking embodiment seriously and cautions me that the deployment of self-reflexivity and intersectionality as methods of critical (legal) inquiry might not always be enough (Davies 2002: 7–26).

My reflections can emerge from a wide trajectory of experiences – my childhoods, my homes and relationships, my material accumulations and affects, my sexual lives, and my aesthetic and political life, both public and private, academic and activist.[5] For the purposes of this essay, I will draw on some experiences from my life in the academy where I encountered Feminism(s) with capital Fs, institutionalized within the university space.[6] Primary in this account is my over-a-decade-long training as a lawyer and jurisprudent, and my vexed and intimate relationship with the law, which I have both contempt for and at the same time have maintained fidelity with, at least in disciplinary terms.

'Law' and 'feminism' have had a shared and continuing history of desire and derision, much like my relationship with them. Even while exposing law's misogynist foundations, and active complicity in the perpetuation of hetero-patriarchal orders, feminism has continued to repose faith in the law for challenging those very orders. Consequently, we have sometimes seen law successfully respond to feminisms' calls, and on many occasions feminism getting depoliticized, privatized, and sometimes even turned into a force of oppression (Behrendt 1993: 27–44; Doezema 2005) due to its intimacies with the legalism of the state, the neo-liberal market (Fraser 2013),[7] religious fundamentalism (Menon 2009), and even left politics (Brown and Halley 2002).

To *do* feminism means an acknowledgement of these entanglements, and taking responsibility for the consequences of choosing to or our inability to not be able to unentangle some of these in our conduct. Thus, to *conduct* oneself as feminist would require living with both feminism's potentials and limits. As a feminist and a

jurisprudent, I am responsible for the feminisms I ally with and the laws that I align with, take on an ethical obligation to care for them and account for their failures, and take responsibility for my inheritances and futures. In thinking with the ideas of failures, futures and inheritances, my refractions as a male feminist jurisprudent in this essay takes the form of a jurisdictional auto-critique about feminism's relationship with law, which by extension is a comment on my relationship with both law and feminism.

I have deliberately chosen to write using a tentative autobiographical voice (Kaplan 1998: 208–16), aware of the critique (Scott 1991: 773–97) and defence (Oksala 2014: 388–403) of the idea of experience in feminist and critical theory. This imperative of grounding scholarship by accounting for an author's subjectivity – even if it is fragmented, hybridized, and nearly impossible (Butler 2005) – is inspired by its rich precedence in feminist legal scholarship (Williams 1992; Adjin-Tettey et al. 2008: 5–38; Behrendt 2009: 71–85). Using this mode of writing serves two purposes for me. First, it enables me to break away from the ostensibly neutral voice of authority that characterizes most male legal scholarship, even when critical. Second, it affords me the opportunity to put my own feminist voice of male authority under scrutiny. As Stuart Hall has written: "Autobiography is usually thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity. But in order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically" (Hall 1992: 277). Even in symbolic terms, I feel that such a methodological move gains particular significance at a time when the neo-liberal and neo-colonial (Smith 1999) networks through which a lot of feminist legal scholarship is produced and published (Craig et al. 2011) end up reinforcing the very hegemonic orders such scholarship of solidarity aims to challenge (Land 2015).

## Of failures: thinking jurisdictionally

An idea from within the traditions of critical legal theory that has been deeply instructive for me, especially in thinking about failure, is 'jurisdiction'. On the face of it, jurisdiction might seem like a concept of positive law concerned only with explicit statutory commands of 'which law applies to what and where'. However, a growing body of Antipodean legal scholarship (Mussawir 2011; Barr 2016), which draws on indigenous legal traditions (Watson 2016; Black 2010), has been theorizing jurisdiction to understand

it as 'the voice or idiom of law', through which we can arrive at an understanding of "lawfulness – of what it means to belong to and live with law" (Dorsett and McVeigh 2012: 5–6). As Shaunnagh Dorsett and Shaun McVeigh note: "If jurisdictional thinking teaches us anything about the contemporary forms and idioms of law it is that the critical engagement of law takes place not just at the level of ideas or practice, but also at the level of conduct" (p. 6).

Jurisdiction in the philosophical register calls to attention the fact that there can be no authority without limits; the fact that to conduct oneself lawfully means to acknowledge those limits; and to the need to take responsibility for the legal authority that we inherit and embody, as well as the relationships that we are embedded in within those limits. Jurisdictional thinking, thus, is about thinking of feminist critique as lawful conduct, one with a sense of location and the knowledge of limits that not only recognizes privilege, but also accounts for its complicities and failures. Here, law is not banished as the discourse of oppression, or feminism hailed as the discourse of emancipation, but they are understood as relational forms of life, in "agonistic intimacy"[8] and sharing a "difficult solidarity",[9] that can engender an ethic of responsibility and offer lessons for a training in the making of lawful feminist selves. Thinking jurisdictionally about feminism helps me make sense of my academic and activist travels, across institutions and intellectual traditions, sovereign and disciplinary borders, and of course across many feminisms. It has enabled me to understand these travels not only as border crossings, but also as "encounters" (Pahuja 2013: 63–98) between feminisms and laws, between laws, and between feminisms.

I had not developed such an understanding of jurisdiction, let alone feminism, as a law student in the late 1990s. At that time, I understood jurisdiction "as the most technical and prosaic form of legal authority" (Dorsett and McVeigh 2012: 4). It was difficult to identify the sexism written into almost every law that I studied, because the proliferating density of legalese had normalized it, and yet there were no pedagogical interventions to point that out for those of us being trained in the law. Knowledge of law gave me and students in my cohort – who had come of age in the shadow of India's economic liberalization – a sense of power that owes its origins to the sexist, classist, and racist foundations of the Common Law (Douzinas and Gearey 2005: 259–302; Watson 2002: 253–69). That same rationality seemed to augur well for the propaganda

of progress, ably buttressed by the law, that public life was then getting suffused with in India (Sircar 2012: 527–73).

When I began my legal studies in 1999, the first Common Law standard with which I got acquainted was that of the 'Reasonable Man'. This mythical masculine standard applied across civil and criminal laws almost at the cost of completely invisibilizing women (Ramanathan 1999: 33). When it came to studying the Indian Penal Code, the woman was hypervisibilized as a victim, stripped of the ability to consent, and could be rescued by the law only if she was 'respectable' (Agnes 1995; Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2002; Kumari 1999: 139). In family law, similarly, women did find substantial recognition, only to be reduced to being carriers of culture and religion, relegated to the regressive roles of the 'good' wife in marriage, denied access to property, and treated as chattel (Agnes 2001). Constitutional law provided me with the tools of equality and non-discrimination to challenge this, but these hallowed constitutional ideas were founded on principles of formal equality, and sought protectionist measures to secure women's rights (Kapur and Cossman 1993: 1).

Around this time, I remember studying an upper-year optional course in our (Bar Council of India-approved) syllabus with an unwieldy name: 'women and law and law relating to the child'. This course taught us the contents and provisions of a whole range of landmark judgements and legislations in India that were broadly concerned with the welfare (not rights) of women and children. This was, by itself, a worthy learning objective. However, by equating women and children as objects of conjoined vulnerabilities, discussions in this course infantilized women and thus considered them to be existentially in need of protection and saving by the law, not from it. In doing this, the pedagogical imperative of the course reinforced, rather than questioned, "familial ideology" (Kapur and Cossman 1996: 87–172), which is at the foundation of the 'feminized' vulnerabilities that we were taught that the law has the capacity to alleviate. Not surprisingly, the words patriarchy or feminism was not uttered even once in class, let alone gender.[10]

There was a growing sense of unease among some students about these laws, especially given the fact that law was taught to us as if it were engraved dictum. It was at this time that I encountered feminism for the first time through a man who was feminist. The constitutional law scholar S. P. Sathe, at my alma mater the ILS Law College in Pune, introduced this idea called feminism with which

we could legitimately talk about the failures of the law and the judiciary in upholding what he would call "gender justice" in his writings (Sathe 1993). Sathe encouraged us to not only critique laws, but also judgements, and consider the antecedents of the judge in evaluating the nature of the decision. While teaching us about the Emergency, he would continuously tell us that even the Constitution is not above critique. In fact, he emphasized that even women judges can deliver gender discriminatory decisions. That a feminist critique of law was being done by a man dispelled the myth that only women could be feminists, or that feminism was only about women. Sathe foundationally altered my understanding of constitutional equality by exposing the sham that formal equality can be, despite the fact that he was a strong secular supporter of the Uniform Civil Code.

I had also been introduced to Marxist theories of law at that time (Pashukanis 1987; Baxi 1993; Chimni 1999: 337–49), and felt that, like communism, feminism was also a method to think about justice and rights of the marginalized; a method that legal theory lacked. Class and gender were the lenses through which the systems of injustice in patriarchy and capitalism, and law's collusion with them, were revealed, and could be challenged. Despite their uneasy alliance (Hartman 1979: 1–33; MacKinnon 1989), feminism was more than a mere philosophy for interpreting the world. It seemed like a more powerful tool than Marxism with which the world could indeed be changed. Not having read Marx in the original at that time made me feel inadequate, especially in Marxist circles, which happened to be comprised mostly of men. However, that was never the case with feminism, because as Gayatri Spivak points out, like Marxism, feminism doesn't "have a named book at the origin" (Spivak 2012: 123). Feminism, as thought and politics, was certainly more accessible and shareable than Marxism for me; and more importantly, while I always heard feminists acknowledge class in their analysis of gender, the converse was seldom the case, especially with male Marxists.

My belief that as a man I did not have to be apologetic about being a feminist, and that questioning of self-privilege was fundamental to feminist conduct, was further strengthened when I read the works of another feminist man: Upendra Baxi, who was also Sathe's student at the Government Law College in Bombay in the 1960s. Baxi was one of the four law professors who wrote the historic 1979 *Open Letter* to the Chief Justice of India, in the light of

the Supreme Court's acquittal of the accused in the Mathura rape case,[11] which was arguably the precipitating event that consolidated what today is called the Indian women's movement. Keeping aside any comment on Baxi's breath of writings, I'll share a quirkily profound footnote from the opening chapter of his 2002 book *The Future of Human Rights* that has had a lasting influence on my feminist thinking. It brought home the role that language, and legal language in particular, plays in the perpetuation of patriarchy. As an apologia for his use of the word 'human', Baxi wrote:

> I use the term 'human' as an act of communicational courtesy. Human stands marked by the presence of man, and person by a 'son'. My preferred non-sexist version is, therefore, a combination of the first letters of both words: 'huper'. I await the day when the word 'huper' will replace the word 'human'.
>
> (Baxi 2002: 1)

Yet, even in the most courteous of circles, Sathe and Baxi are not known as feminist legal scholars.[12] As men their claim to fame has been as constitutional scholars or legal theorists – universalist descriptors that avoid any particularized identitarian or ideological pigeonholing. As men they could afford to sometimes invoke feminism in their scholarship (especially when they had to write on issues related to women and gender), and otherwise not. As upper-class, upper-caste men in a male-dominated legal academy, they had materially very little at stake with regard to their use or non-use of feminism.[13] Going back to the *Open Letter*, interestingly, despite the presence of two prominent women feminist law professors as signatories, in the conclusion to the letter, all the signatories referred to themselves collectively as "lawmen". On a different occasion, I had heard Uma Chakravarty once trenchantly comment at a seminar in Delhi that even among declaredly feminist heterosexual academic couples, it would always be the case that the man would work on caste and the woman on gender. On point, Lisa Duggan makes this astute observation about 'heteronormativity in the left academy':

> Have you noticed? The way that so many left academic couples divide up the intellectual and political world in their scholarship and institutional alliances? So many of the straight-identified men analyze the dynamics of class, and sometimes race, but leave gender and sexuality out. As a set-aside agenda of sorts

> for the women and queers to undertake. The female partners of these men often (not always) address gender and sexuality, usually along with class and race (though again, not always). It's kind of like the primary responsibility for housework – there's a double day for the feminized, who also legitimate the guys. Who can say he's not a feminist, not a queer ally, if his consort and/or close comrades take care of that for him?
>
> (Duggan 2015)

Such are the neat gendered divisions of intellectual labour!

I don't know about the domestic economies of labour within the Sathe and Baxi households. Though a speculative question, it is necessary to ask: for both of them to have carried out their successful public scholarly lives as male feminist thinkers, what kind of domestic labour was being carried out, and by whom, in their private lives? This is not a question directed specifically at them, but to point at the fault lines that all male leftist academics like me, who call themselves feminist, need to confront and are obligated to take responsibility for with regard to our work. As a feminist man, calling out the sexism of the law and its language might just not be enough for acknowledging the intellectual and familial inheritances that have enabled us to be feminist and do feminism. In fact, Baxi had made a powerful self-reflexive gesture in this regard, with particular reference to his philosophy of law teaching. In response to a question from his students – "What are you good for?" – he had replied:

> Do not merely look at what I say; look at what I do with what I say. I simply cannot carry conviction about what I say to young minds unless they see that I mean what I say about the rule of law, human rights, human dignity.
>
> (Baxi 1990: 154)

And by extension, I might add, feminism.

For me, to think jurisdictionally about 'men doing feminism' has, thus, been a way to think about feminist speech and action as co-constitutive practices. Doing feminism is not only about how sophisticatedly we use feminist theory in our scholarship and teaching, but also, and more importantly, the methods – the conduct – that we bring to bear on the scholarship we produce and the knowledge we share with students, colleagues, comrades, friends, families, lovers and strangers. The question of conduct, however, is also about the conduct

of feminism itself, as an active form of knowledge, its relational lives, and its journeys and mutations across jurisdictions.

It is important to acknowledge that Sathe and Baxi, along with their women feminist colleagues Lotika Sarkar and Vasudha Dhagamwar, have contributed to the training of some of India's most important women feminist legal scholars. It was through Sathe's teaching and scholarship that I was introduced to the rich tradition of feminist legal writing in India: Flavia Agnes, Nandita Haksar, Archana Parshar, Kalpanna Kannabiran, and Ratna Kapur, among others, who over the years have compellingly demonstrated how law has been an active and constituent element in sustaining women's subordination in India, and what feminist legal scholarship and activism can do to challenge that. Even while critiquing law, each of these scholar–activists have offered provocative feminist visions of how to think creatively with and against the law. Their feminisms have taught me that we cannot give up law to the state or religion – and now increasingly to the market.

If Sathe and Baxi had set me off on my feminist journey as a man, and taught me how feminism can both reveal and challenge the sexist limits of the law, it was two women feminists – Ratna Kapur and Sharmila Rege – who taught me to recognize and challenge the statist and casteist limits of feminism.

Ratna Kapur in particular has had a very strong influence on my feminist thinking, because it was in her work that sexuality, agency, and pleasure entered the feminist legal frame that was until then occupied primarily by gender and violence (Kapur and Cossman 1996; Kapur 2005). That law had to be re-conceptualized outside of the liberal rights framework, that feminist law reform claims had to rethink how their activism reified conservative sexual morality, that feminism had to think of sexual rights and not just of sexual wrongs, and that feminism had to start thinking of sex not just as a site of violence, but also of pleasure and agency, were revelatory ideas. Kapur also offered postcolonial feminist critiques of international human rights law to expose its colonial foundations, and thus, fracturing the romantic notion of feminist global sisterhood, that I had much faith in. It is because of her scholarship, and an opportunity to work with her in 2002 at the Centre for Feminist Legal Research in Delhi, that I got to know about the sex workers' movement in India, which motivated me to get involved with the activism of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in Kolkata (Sircar and Dutta 2011: 333–49).

Kapur has been a sex-positive feminist and a supporter of the right *to* sex work. Her scholarship opened up a way to understand feminism that was hitherto unknown to me. Until then, I understood feminism to be a discourse that enabled me to recognize the limits of the law, but now the limits within feminism started coming to the fore. That the sex workers' struggles for the right to work with dignity in India and across the world had very little support from feminists, and which still continues to be the case, is part of a history of feminism's failures (Murthy and Seshu 2014). Not only sex work, but as pointed out by Nivedita Menon, the Indian women's movement has also had a very uneasy relationship with lesbians (Menon 2007: 23). Kapur's theorizing of the "sexual subaltern" (Kapur 2005) was what set the stage for my encounter with queer theory, and deepened my engagement with the sexual rights movement in India (Sircar 2017: 1–36).

If Kapur enabled me to see the failures of feminist legal scholarship and activism in India, which broadly carried a combination of liberal and radical feminist proclivities, it is my disciplinary crossover and encounter with women's studies that enabled me to see the failure of sex-positive feminisms' engagement with caste in India. As a student of Sharmila Rege at the University of Pune's Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre (KSPWSC) in 2003, I learned about feminist traditions that were rooted in the struggles of the anti-caste movement in India, and in Maharashtra in particular. Much before she wrote *Against the Madness of Manu* (Rege 2013), Rege introduced Ambedkar to her students as not just an anti-caste but also a feminist thinker. Reading Ambedkar, Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, and many other male and female Dalit and anti-caste thinkers alerted me to my scandalous silence, as well as that of both feminism and law on caste, in pedagogy, scholarship, and politics. The idea of self-reflexivity that I had inherited from feminism until then seemed so hollow, so superficial, that it made me conveniently avert an acknowledgement of my upper-caste status. As if thinking of myself as a secular feminist had washed away my caste privilege.

Even as I held on to Kapur's sex-positive feminism, I wondered why in her writings on sex work, or even in her writings on secularism and her critique of the Hindu Right (Kapur and Cossman 1999), has caste never featured. I have also wondered if one can conversely question Dalit feminism of harking back to radical feminism in talking about violence against Dalit women, of yet again

reposing faith in the law, and foreclosing the space to talk about sexuality and pleasure especially in the context of sex work that many Dalit feminists understand as systemic perpetuation of caste oppression. I wouldn't know of others, but Rege's feminist scholarship, while foregrounding caste, has also spoken of women's pleasure and its patriarchal appropriation (Rege 1995: 23–38), and has come out in strong defence of homosexuality by exposing the Indian Left's homophobia (Rege 1996: 1359–60).

Yet, I have kept wondering, in line with a question that I would continuously ask myself, how have Kapur and Rege accounted for their subject positions as upper-caste scholars in their own feminist conduct? Rege provided some understanding of this in her political and methodological adoption of what she called a "dalit feminist standpoint":

> A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is feasible for subjectivities *can* be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for' the dalit feminists but they can 'reinvent' themselves as dalit feminists. Such a position therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based 'authenticity' and narrow 'identity politics'.
>
> (Rege 1998: 39–46)

Despite opening up the possibility for taking up a 'feminist standpoint', as it were, feminist scholarship and feminist legal scholarship in much greater measure, for me, has inadequately responded to the question about male feminist subjectivity, except for pointing at the limits and perils of lines of enquiry that invoke 'experience' and 'authenticity'. How have I taken responsibility for these contradictory feminist inheritances in my conduct as a male feminist jurisprudent?

As an aside, I want to share an exchange with Sharmila from that time which has left a deep impression on me and continues to carry a talismanic quality in my teaching life as a feminist. As a human rights educator and youth worker, I had approached her with a proposal to offer short workshops on law and sexuality for students at the KSPWSC. The programme was being supported by a local NGO. In a considered email she wrote:

> I have been quite upset with 'survival' issues that a majority of students coming to the university are facing and do not find any

> NGO effort addressing this. I find most of the themes [in your workshop outline] assuming a middle class urban student – while I see in my classroom at least 50% who has had no access to English and the cultural capital that goes with it – there is a need to think through these issues and this has been troubling me a lot.

At that time the import of her concern didn't dawn on me; in fact, I even considered her response to be slightly conservative and on the lines of those who consider sexuality to be a bourgeois issue. The workshops did not take place.

A year after that I began teaching a course on gender, law, and citizenship at the KSPWSC and confronted the reality of what Sharmila had expressed in the email. That teaching experience, one which sealed my decision to pursue full-time academic work, was the most challenging that I had ever undertaken. A majority of the students in my class, most of them women, were first-generation college-goers, from some of the most rural parts of Maharashtra, and Marathi was the language they were most comfortable in. Many were Dalit. Despite the pressures of joining a so-called professional course that might yield better employment opportunities, they had the courage to pursue women's studies. The course material that I had put together was entirely in English. At the end of the first class a group came over to me and said that they will not be able to go through the course, but they really wanted to do it. They came up with a suggestion: that I take separate classes in Hindi for them (since I did not speak Marathi). Not that my Hindi was much better, but I said yes. Through the rest of the semester we met both for the classes taught in English (they wanted to learn as much from those), as well as additional classes that I tried hard to teach in Hindi.

Never before, and never since then, have I experienced collaborative learning in this way. While I tried to explain concepts in Hindi, for which my vocabulary was woefully inadequate, the students contributed to building a Marathi word bank for key feminist legal ideas and theories. They helped me find the words, we debated and disagreed. I fumbled, they were lost at times; but we persisted. As a group assignment for the course, the students translated into Marathi the texts of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,* a practice which was in line with a project

that the KSPWSC had taken on to translate key feminist writings from English to Marathi. It is possibly too romantic of me to expect that such a sense of feminist community and kinship can be rekindled whenever I teach – but there was indeed something about the material conditions of 'survival issues' that enabled such a collaboration. Sharmila and her colleagues tried to build these structures of feminist care within the university. Systemically, the neo-liberal university (which works as a corporation) is built to destroy ideas of collaboration, community, and kinship – its primary aim is to incentivize excellence through individuation and responsibilization.

## Of futures: taking a break?

Failure can be a moment of both painful paralysis and intense inspiration. Taking responsibility for failure is germane to an ethical practice of transformative politics and scholarship (Halberstam 2011). My travels across sovereign and intellectual jurisdictions to the University of Toronto in 2008 happened at a time when my work focused primarily on queer sexualities – particularly sex workers' and LGBT rights – and the two conceptual repositories of knowledge and politics that I had was that of feminism and Marxism, with all their fractures. Despite the fact that feminism had begun to feel slightly inadequate (much less than Marxism though) in theorizing sexuality – as I realized on reading Gayle Rubin (Rubin 2011: 137–81) – I held on to it, not only because of loyalty's sake, but also because it was the manifesto that I tried to live by.

Brenda Cossman, my teacher in Toronto, pushed me to think of what it might mean to take a break from feminism. Cossman for long has been engaging with colleagues across other North American law schools in asking the question: "Is feminist theory enough?" (Cossman et al. 2003: 601–37). This was indeed a paralyzing question for me. I would have to answer the same question that I asked of Sathe and Baxi: am I able to take a break from feminism because I am a man, and do not have high stakes beyond a materially inconsequential compromise?

That irresponsibility towards a certain kind of "paranoid structuralism" (Kennedy 1991: 75–116) in (mostly radical) feminist thinking can be politically productive was something that I discovered through Janet Halley's *Split Decisions* (Halley 2006). Halley argues that "taking a break from feminism" is a good thing to do because feminism has now begun to walk the corridors of power.

According to Halley and her colleagues in agreement with her, feminism today, in active collusion with law and technologies of global governance (Halley et al. 2006: 335–423; Halley et al. 2018), is no longer about making possible an emancipatory future. In many ways it keeps in place the very identities, binaries, and power structures it claims to challenge, but to do that it uses the same vocabulary of transformation that it was founded upon. Some of this is evident in the context of India as well, particularly with regard to rape law reforms (Kotiswaran 2017: 78–87). Halley, of course, borrows from North American queer theory's anti-identitarian critique to argue that "identity is not the core truth and safe zone of authenticity and authority posited by our most widely shared assumptions about identity politics; rather, identity may be part of the problem" (Halley 2000: 42).

Although aware of feminism's limitations, taking a break initially sounded flippant to me, as if I was now bored of it and wanted to go cherry picking in the theory-*bazaar*. It felt like an irresponsible act. Yet, Halley's proposition was very inviting. Albeit not beyond critique (Cossman et al. 2003: 601–63; Otto 2007: 345–52), reading Halley seemed to have momentarily put to rest my troubles with being a feminist man. I did not have to always have an explanation for how I can be a feminist or a queerist (if a word like that exists) despite not possessing the authentic 'experience' of identifying as woman or queer, a disqualification that has been pointed out to me many a times within feminist (but not queer) academic and activist circles.

And yet, even if I could think of taking a break from feminism, I could never think of a feminist 'self' devoid of experience; one without historical consciousness (Genovese 2013: 41–57). Even at the cost of valorizing experience and forcing a theory/practice binary, I continue to unsuccessfully grapple with the question: does theorizing become the queer-feminist academic's privilege whereas identity politics remains the drudgery of the materially disenfranchised woman/queer? Isn't it telling that the 'taking a break from feminism' project in North America – of which I have been a part as one of its many Southern interlocutors – has primarily been a White enterprise that remains conspiratorially silent about First Nations sovereignty in settler-colonial states? Can 'taking a break' imply a convenient academic mirage to avoid taking responsibility for both feminist and queer theory's complicities with colonialism and capitalism? (McCluskey 2009: 115–34; Morgensen 2011).

That 'taking a break' or queer-feminism's anti-identitarian turn could be a way to imagine other futures is inspirational, and it is an unsettling inspiration that I would like to live with. An inspiration that does not let the excitement of the future blind us to the darkness of our failures. A darkness that is not only in the past, but in the here and now. A darkness that will also accompany us into the future.

## Undoing: a hasty conclusion

Some years ago, in the anonymous feedback to a course called 'law and social hierarchies' that I had taught at the Jindal Global Law School, a student wrote: "too much feminism". More recently, while teaching a course on critical approaches to jurisprudence, a bright male student came up after class and earnestly asked: "For how much more time will we carry on with feminism? When will it end? Are we not going to do anything else in this course?" I must admit that I was elated despite the tone to criticism. On another occasion, during the same course a student asked in class which critical approach to jurisprudence is my favourite. Even before I could answer, another student shouted out: "feminism!" I returned a smile, satisfied that it has turned out to be obvious to them. Would I read this as an achievement? Not entirely, because the mythical moral heft that I am bestowed with because of being perceived as a mild-mannered feminist man (oh, he's so sensitive!), might not, in fact, be extended to a female feminist faculty who calls out sexism more confrontationally and with far more acuity than me (oh, she's so aggressive!).

Still, feminism is one excess – along with my fatness – that I would take pride in proliferating as a man. This gains particular significance where I've seen even very critically bent male students who tend to pay more attention to the modules on Marx or Foucault, but feel bored at best, and frustrated at worst, when discussing feminist jurisprudence. It is also difficult to remain agnostic to such responses from students because it speaks of a much larger institutional culture of intellectual sexism in the legal discipline where in the teaching of so-called hard law subjects, feminist jurisprudence and feminist legal theory continue be considered merely an add-on (Thornton 1998: 171). This pervasive sentiment is institutionally perpetuated, and as Pratiksha Baxi has argued, it has reduced feminist jurisprudence to merely a "perspective" rather than recognizing

its "epistemic challenge" to the foundations of legal theory and legal education in India (Baxi 2008: 81).

Yet, if I had to write a feedback on my conduct as a feminist man – both inside and outside the legal academy – would I be able to say that I practice 'too much feminism'? Perhaps not.

It is imperative for male feminist academics to start thinking about undoing feminism as scholarship, to understand doing as conduct,[14] taking seriously the fact that it is not enough that I call myself a feminist man, or write using feminist theoretical tools, or with sound arguments about why men ought to be feminists. Feminism is not only about what I write and the kind of politics I bring to my research, writing, and teaching, but it is also about the material, relational, and embodied practices of knowledge production and circulation that I participate in.

Is my scholarly conduct collaborative, or does it reinforce privatized ownership of intellectual ideas that do not acknowledge and share its inheritances? How do I acknowledge the traditions and inheritances that have made me a feminist? In footnotes to academic papers that get published in journals behind prohibitively expensive paywalls? What are my citation practices? Do I engender the classroom space and yet practice my masculine authoritative self as the teacher? How do I account for the sexual and gendered economies of labour in my marriage that enable me to be a man doing feminism? As a feminist man, how do I account for the institutions of heterosexual marriage and the neo-liberal academy that I inhabit and draw power and privilege from?

I can have smart answers to these questions because both law and feminism within the neo-liberal academy increasingly work, under the garb of criticality, in a technocratic problem-solving mode that I have been trained well in (Thornton 2011). But, these theoretically sound, well-argued answers will have little to say about how as a man I *do* my feminism. The brief academic journey that I have charted might have much to say about my scholarly feminist inheritances, but it says very little about how I *do* feminism. Because doing feminism cannot possibly be entirely reduced to writing or research. It is not possible for jurisprudence or feminist scholarship to make intelligible what men (or women) *do* when they *do* feminism, and how they *do* it. As a man doing feminism, that is a jurisdictional limitation of critical scholarship (the aporia of praxis) and my legal academic career's investments in it, which I ought to acknowledge and take responsibility for (Cornell 1992).

## Coda: a slow and struggling afterthought

On re-reading the last paragraph in the previous section, it seems to me that I rushed into finishing the piece. I found the questions that I had posed to myself difficult to answer. I wanted to overcome the difficulty by ending the piece, because it had to be brought to a close. In law, arriving at the judgement by resolving the 'hard case' is a key marker of a noble practice of jurisprudence, personified by one scholar in the hypermasculine figure of Hercules slaying Hydra (her multiple heads signifying too many bothering questions that adjudication has to wrest control over) (Rackley 2005: 213–32). My conclusion as judgement is a forced resolution, even if indeterminate. The feminist in me was left feeling dissatisfied. I could have returned to revise and update that last paragraph. The process of figuring out how to address my difficulty was slow. It was too late to make more changes. Thus, this afterthought. An equally inadequate appendage.

I want to take the idea of the afterthought as a form of feral feminist conduct that enables us to return, ruminate, and stray without fear and apology, after an imposed closure. After *we* impose a closure. Such a conduct is of particular significance for me as a feminist jurisprudent because of the primacy put on the ideas of speed and transformation in feminist legal reform projects; and the instrumental ends (conviction, compensation, incarceration) that characterize the practice of adjudication. Governmental, judicial, and institutional delays and apathy, when it comes to questions of gender and its intersectionalities ought to be questioned, no doubt, especially at a time where the violence being directed at marginalized women's and gender non-conforming bodies has mutated into a macabre concoction of spectacular and numbing visibility, and tacit and normalized brutality (Dutta and Sircar 2013: 293–306). But I've been sensing a growing prejudice attached to the idea of slowness, particularly in the realms of agenda- and funding-driven feminist activism and research in a hyper-mediatized age (Berg and Seeber 2016).

Slowness sometimes does find place in our feminist legal frames of meaning-making. The word struggle, much more than difficulty, is what offers hospitality to the idea of being slow and contemplative, and acknowledges "the value of silence" (Eng 2002: 85–94). So, what's the difference between struggle and difficulty? Creating an affective hierarchy between the two is unhelpful. However, it

might be worth recognizing that there is a certain kind of romance attached to the former. Does difficulty not sound feminist enough? Or is it feminism's Marxist hangover that attaches us to struggle more strongly? But doing feminism is difficult and that difficulty is lived through struggle. Or am I merely expressing academic vanity?

A similar pairing of terms poses another quandary. As I considered whether to write this afterthought or not, I kept wondering if I am getting late with meeting the deadline, or have I been too slow in thinking about a good conclusion? Do they carry the same valence? What determines which expression we use to describe our feminist limitations to keep up with patriarchal/capitalist/racist/colonial/secular time? Or do we use it to describe, sometimes deride, aporia? In a way, these concerns have emerged from my experience of writing the afterthought: have I been very slow, or too late in completing it? It might be both. Lateness, it seems, carries with it a pejorative sense of sloth – slowness, on the other hand, carries a floaty sensation of abandon. Both do not merit appreciation in the deeply toxic masculine culture of speed in the neo-liberal academy.

Interestingly, difficulty and/or struggle has a connection with lateness and/or slowness. If it was not for the protracted lateness or slowness of feminist experiences, will anything ever qualify as a difficulty or a struggle?

I have now arrived at stuckness. Time to bore, again. *A luta continua*.

## Notes

1 Parts of this piece was written at the University of Melbourne, which stands on the colonized land of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation to which their sovereignty has not been ceded. I acknowledge Debolina Dutta's contribution in helping me think through some of the core ideas in this piece, and for her critical conversations on methods of feminist writing and living. Thanks are also due to Pratiksha Baxi, Trina Nileena Banerjee, Saptarshi Mandal, Adil Hasan Khan, and Rajshree Chandra for their very useful comments. I had the occasion to present earlier versions at the 'Loyal Interlopers? Men Doing Feminism in India' workshop at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta in 2014, and at the Institute for Global Law and Policy Conference at Harvard Law School, Cambridge in 2015; and I thank the participants at these venues, particularly Ratna Kapur, Sundhya Pahuja, Ben Golder, Shaun McVeigh, Genevieve Painter, Julia Dehm, Vik Kanwar, Rukmini Sen, and J Devika, for their engagement. I cannot thank Zaid Al Baset and Romit Chowdhury enough for making me a part of their project, and for their sage editorial advice through

the process of writing. Without the labour of Aishwarya Koralath's meticulous research assistance I couldn't have completed the piece. All errors and claims to judgement, facts, and politics remain mine.

2 The framing of the theme as such corresponds with the title of an edited collection from 1998, in which authors from a range of identitarian and ideological positions self-reflexively engaged with the possibilities and perils of "men doing feminism" (Digby 1998).

3 Many kindred colleagues have often misread this particular description that I have been using for a while now. It generally gets understood as my way of claiming legitimacy as a heterosexual person who researches and writes on queerness. In my mind this has nothing to do with claiming legitimacy – because I am not writing with the intention of being judged by anyone – though that might be a consequence over which I do not have control. By using practicing heterosexual, I make a queering gesture that does two things: first, it complicates the relationship between sexual behaviour and identity; and second, it unsettles the naturalness attached to heterosexuality by calling it out to be historically contingent and socially constructed. For a discussion on this see Sircar (2008: 10–17).

4 For the conceptual relationship between 'doing' and 'conduct', I draw on Debolina Dutta's ongoing doctoral research on the politics of feminist jurisprudential knowledge production and how this is a material practice of self-making tied to a time and place. For some allusions to this argument, see Dutta (2016: 186–201).

5 In this chapter I do not offer an account of my personal or familial locations where I also (try) to live feminist lives. This decision was not an easy one. I feel vulnerable and scared to do so, especially because of the relational accounts I will have to share, and that I still do not have the courage to deal with the consequences such accounts might have on me and the people involved. This leaves me in a state of a double-bind. While I see the problem with not making the personal political in my account here as a betrayal of sorts, I hope that this account will offer a counter-intuitive possibility of making the political personal.

6 The privileging of my academic journey is not to deprioritize what I have learnt from my activist engagements. Academics and activism are not mutually exclusive domains of feminism for me, but for the purposes of understanding a particular kind of trajectory feminism in the university has taken and how that has shaped my journey, I focus on what I have learnt in the academy. For one account of my activist engagements with feminism see Sircar (2010).

7 For an anticolonial counter to Fraser, see Bhandar and DaSilva (2013).

8 I borrow this expression from Bhrigupati Singh, who has used it in a different context (Singh 2011: 430–50).

9 This was Trina Nileena Banerjee's characterization of the 'men doing feminism in India' project.

10 For a distribution of courses in a five-year law programme at ILS Law College, Pune, see http://209.190.24.122:8080/display/academics/.5-yr+BA,LLB+course+details. In 2008, many years after I had passed out of law school, a subject called 'gender justice and feminist jurisprudence' was

included by the BCI as an optional course under the 'Constitutional Law Group'. See www.barcouncilofindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/BCIRulePartIV.pdf.

11 The other signatories to the letter were Lotika Sarkar, Vasudha Dhagamwar, and Raghunath Kelkar. For the reproduction of the letter see John (2008: 267).

12 Debolina Dutta's unpublished piece makes a case for Baxi as a feminist jurisprudent. See Debolina Dutta, 'A Story of the Open Letter' (2016) [presented at Provocations III: Feminist Experiences of Law, Melbourne Law School, 27–28 October, 2016].

13 Between the two, Baxi of course has produced a much more rigorous and sustained body of feminist scholarship. For some representative works, see Baxi (1994a: 168–80, 1994b: 67–88, 1999: 275–90).

14 I do not mean to suggest that I had no inkling of the 'conduct' question prior to this. My exchanges with colleagues and teachers at the Melbourne Law School – particularly, Sundhya Pahuja, Shaun McVeigh, Ann Genovese, Claire Opperman, and Debolina Dutta – have offered me a language to speak about it from within the disciplinary location of law.

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Part II

# Movements


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Chapter 5

# Reformer-Man and feminist man

## The end of an era in Kerala

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### Introduction

'Men in feminism' has always been an uneasy category in Anglo-American feminism. This has been particularly the case after the manner in which the knowledge-objects of feminism became radically pluralized in the late 20th century. In the 1980s, the position of the male feminist within feminism was rather undecided. On the one hand, there was Luce Irigaray, suggesting that male feminism must involve a sense of 'admiration', wonder, sudden surprise, a sense of the new that precedes objectification. Irigaray points out that this relation has never existed between the sexes and in a move that seems to be turning Freudian psychoanalytic theory on its head (the male astonishment and fright supposedly felt at the sight of female genitalia), she demands an acceptance of irreducible female difference (quoted in Heath 1996: 221). But on the other hand, there was deep tension about male theorists' interest in what were recognized as the knowledge-objects of feminism – most clearly evident in the well-known critique by Elaine Showalter of 'literary transvestism' as a strategy of male appropriation (1983). Paul Smith put it well when he remarked that, as a male feminist, he understood that the discourse of feminism "has every reason not to take me seriously, not to take me in; but as yet it has not actually passed the proper legislation" (Smith 1985: 6).

From another angle, there was, in the early 1990s, much apprehension about potential loss through the entry of gender as a category of analysis. Tania Modleski, for instance, expressed the apprehension that the turn towards anti-essentialist deconstruction could easily turn into a banishment or even denial of the political task of examining the implications of living in a body recognized

and defined as female (1991: 14). Particularly, masculinity studies was viewed with the suspicion that it signalled "a male feminist perspective that excluded women" (ibid). She especially criticized the much-discussed volume *Engendering Men* as one which displays the dangers of the male feminist project. Very briefly, her criticism is that this volume of essays, all authored by men, does little more than showcasing male bonding around feminism (1991: 12). Modleski's writing appeared at a time in which gay studies had definitely carved itself as a field distinct from, and not always sympathetic to, feminism; it was also the time when lesbian studies and feminist studies were still in tension within a unitary field. In this confused scenario, it was pointed out by others also that male feminist studies did not seem to have developed its own methodology; rather it seemed to refer most often to the gender and presence of the male critic/activist within feminism (Roof 1992). However, importantly, Modleski also remarked that there was indeed male feminist criticism taking shape, of "the kind that analyzes male power, male hegemony, with a concern for the effects of this power on the *female subject* and with an awareness of how frequently male subjectivity works to appropriate 'femininity' while oppressing women" (1991: 6–7). This promise seems to have flowered in the 1990s, but in ways radically different from that envisaged by *Engendering Men* or the other much-discussed volume, *Men in Feminism*, edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (1987).

However, this was also the period which definitely saw the disenchantment within feminism of an unproblematic identification with 'women'; instead, a number of breaks in such identifications with the primary object of feminist inquiry, which led to significant re-specifications, appeared. Lesbian and gay studies, studies of transgender identities, intersex studies, and so on could certainly not be contained within 'women'. Thus, the rise of gender studies and queer theory, two fields that engaged in productive and critical conversations, did not really confirm Modleski's fears. Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's brilliant *Between Men* (1985), which examined the structure and functioning of gender in history through the lenses of sexuality and class, brought to the fore differences between men and inaugurated trajectories of feminist analyses of masculinities; corporeality was deeply interrogated and the performativity of gender was explored (Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, 1990); by the end of the 1990s, masculinity was being studied in connection with transsexuality, intersex activism, or female masculinity

(Halberstam 1998); the universal significance of the male–female divide was being challenged in ever-more powerful ways (Oyewumi 1997). In sum, 'male feminism' could potentially mean many things other than the simple presence of men in (implicitly unitary and heterosexual) feminism.

The story, definitely, is bound to be different in non-metropolitan, South Asian locations. This paper is about men 'doing' feminism in the 1980s and early 1990s in Kerala, a period in which feminism as a politics was beginning to take shape. The enormous difficulties in the way of this appearance were too conspicuous to be ignored: most importantly, the discourse of social development and the 'Kerala Model'[1] and that of Kerala's matrilineal past,[2] both which seemed to indicate that women in Kerala did not need any liberation. Nevertheless, the specific history of left politics in the region seemed to suddenly open up the possibility of the birth of feminism from within the womb of radical left politics here. Among the well-intentioned midwives were, no doubt, several male intellectuals – mostly heterosexual, powerful, high-caste radical men – men indeed were *doing* feminism, especially its discourse. For it was not as if there was already a feminism in place for men to get 'in' or craft an 'and' relationship with. These male intellectuals were prominent in introducing feminist theory and developing a critical feminist history of the region, as well as in proposing different kinds of activisms, often in the face of criticism by women, feminist and non-feminist. I believe that the tension that this induced between male theorists and female activists had deleterious effects, and was one of the conditions that enabled the hegemonic rise of governmentalized feminism in Kerala after the mid-1990s.

This paper relies on materials from the late 1980s and early 1990s – especially the debates in Kerala's public sphere and the Malayalam literary public, and on interviews with prominent feminists who were active in the relevant period.[3] I begin with reflecting on the history of recent feminism in Kerala and the specific nature of men's presence, in the next section. In the section that follows, I give an account of the famous debate on feminist writing from this period, popularly known as the *pennezhuthu* debate, to demonstrate the power relations that structured the positions of men and women within late 1980s–early 1990s feminism. I conclude with some reflections on the present of 'political feminism' in Kerala, especially in the wake of the Kiss of Love campaign.

## *I*

The earliest feminist groups which took shape in the mid-1980s were of activists and intellectuals – who had links with radical ex-Naxalite groups (but who were not necessarily members or even active sympathizers) and who were active in the oppositional civil, social mobilizations such as the independent fishworkers' movement (Erwer 2003). The men, who provided most of the theoretical foundations, were often prominent members of these groups and well-known radical left intellectuals. Radical left Naxalite groups in the post-Emergency phase emphasized the need to mobilize women, tribal people, and Dalit people (Kumar 1989). Their presence was considerable indeed. A much-read feminist pamphlet on the Thankamani atrocities, titled 'Maanabhangathinte Raashtriyam' ('The Politics of Rape'), was authored by a team of four men and a woman (Venugopal et al. 1986). Translations and adaptations of writing by feminists elsewhere in India, such as Flavia Agnes, were also produced (Erwer 2003: 205).

The early male feminist intellectuals set out to define feminism and theorize patriarchy in Malayali society drawing largely upon the work of Anglo-American feminists emergent in Indian feminism, both of which were accessible to some extent. Their project was riddled with tensions. First, it sought to create a truly radical cosmopolitan oppositional-left resistance that was also to resonate with regional history and culture. Second, in keeping with its aim of politicizing women as a major oppressed group, it, many a time, sought to both release and contain feminist political charge (so that it would remain within the broad ambit of the radical left, which was undeniably masculinist). That is, the accounts that these intellectuals produced of Anglo-American feminism, Indian feminism, and their respective histories were undoubtedly coloured by their own wariness of feminism as 'identity politics' on the one hand, and their eagerness to harness its political energies to other forms of identity politics and socialist struggles. The determination to forge a feminism that was primarily a tool to transform socialist politics is evident, for instance, in what is often regarded as the first attempt to describe feminism comprehensively in Malayalam, *Streevimochanam: Charitram, Siddhantam, Sameepanam*, by two prominent male feminists, Ramakrishnan and Venugopal (1989). Clearly seeking distance from the state's efforts to ameliorate women's oppression and the early feminist attempts to engage with

the state, these authors begin their account of feminism in India by referring to feminist groups that had clear leftist inclinations (p. 20). They criticize Indian feminism for its suspicion of Western feminism and its analysis of patriarchy, and what is perceived to be its excessive positivist orientation. The presence of a strong political and philosophical foundation derived from Western feminism (and by implication, suspicion of the positivist social scientific orientation, and concomitant willingness to bargain with the liberal state) is said to be the feature that differentiated feminist groups and the women's organizations of political parties (pp. 22–3). Not surprisingly, the *Towards Equality* report received little attention.[4] Early introductory feminist texts authored by women too displayed the same orientation. The members of one such socialist-feminist group, Prachodana, which published a pamphlet on feminism (Indira nd. c.1988), noted:

> This pamphlet explains feminism from a Marxist point of view. The situation today is that feminism as the philosophy of the women's liberation movement, the very word, is deeply misunderstood . . . examples may be found from women's liberation organizations themselves for the misuse of the idea of women's liberation . . . We discover that no activism that dismisses the proletariat and its organizations are worth people's participation. Feminism which was born out of Marxist ideas does not stand apart from its fundamental insights . . .
>
> As the earliest activity of the women's liberation movement, our task is to take feminist ideas into anti-capitalist, anti-fascist organizations and their political parties, and thereby expand the consciousness of the forces engaged in combat for the proletariat.
>
> (Publisher's Note, in unnumbered opening page)

In all these early texts, feminism is hailed as a politics that brings together an altogether different visibility of the mutual ties of political and socio-cultural fields. The power structures that shape the latter, it is inevitably pointed out, remain unseen, and the task of the feminist critique is to highlight these. Besides, the connection between the oppression perpetuated by these structures and thriving capitalist power in the workplace was to be revealed. In a strong sense, this echoed early 20th-century debates on social and community reform in Malayali society, in which Western-educated

and 'enlightened' men who did not identify themselves as primarily located in domestic space proposed measures to end the oppression of women who were identified as domestic-subjects located in the socio-cultural field. There was broad consensus among the advocates of social change of the early 20th century that reconstituting social life in terms of modern gender relations required the institution of a non-reversible relation of power between those who came into contact with the norms and mores of modern society earlier, and those who could not. The former were of course more likely to be men and the latter women. The Reformer-Man's power was widely accepted by the early 20th century as an indispensable condition for the realization of the projected alternative to the prevailing social order based on caste difference and inequality: a society organized by modern gender (Devika 2007).

One may read in male feminism of the late 1980s a continuity with this history: as a fresh attempt, even if unwitting, to articulate such power by a new generation of Reformer-Men who did not identify themselves as located in the domestic, but seeking to transform domestic and social institutions and relations. Politics in Kerala has been historically a male-dominated, masculinist field (Jeffrey 2003; Erwer 2003) and radical left politics, too, has been no exception. No wonder then that at a time when men in Anglo-American feminism seem to have been struggling to make sense of their place 'in' feminism or their relation 'with' feminism (for example, Smith 1985), male feminists in Kerala were confidently 'making' feminism or 'doing it', with great good intentions but little self-reflexivity. N. K. Ravindran, a leading male feminist of those times, who did refer explicitly to the dilemma in an article published in a late-1980s collection of feminist essays, raised the question only to dismiss it rather quickly (Ravindran n.d.): "Men as propagandists or advocates of feminism have often raised controversies and much sarcasm," he began. But this thought can arise only from bad intentions: "This tendency relies mainly upon the apolitical stance which denies feminism's political dimensions and reduces it to a mere 'argument for women'" (p. 43). In the first sentence, Ravindran raises the issue; in the second, he dismisses it. In the third sentence, however, he returns to the question of men and feminism by subtly evacuating his own subjectivity and referring to the abstract male, somehow distanced from the author. Continuing from his dismissal, he admits that, "nevertheless, because they belong to an oppressor-master-sex class, it must be admitted that

it is really simple and easy for men to accept and assimilate feminism" (p. 43). He elaborates the would-be male feminist's primary task as the self-chosen renunciation of male privilege. However, feminists are not advised to push for this directly, but through class organizations:

> Class struggles and feminist struggles must be melded together in this spirit and communists and other progressive groups must ready themselves for conscious effort to renew themselves. At the same time, the feminist movement should lead struggles and debates that keep up the pressure to realize this political process.
>
> (45)

The section concludes with yet another, more final, dismissal, which totally erases the specificity of gender divides – the faith that full male identification with feminism is indeed possible is now confidently expressed. This is through constructing an analogy with members of the elite, ostensibly, attaining full identification with the working class. He claims that Marx and Engels attained this, as well as Lenin: "It is surely possible for men to pass through a similar process and re-build themselves and through this effect, acquire the feminist political position" (47).

The selective readings of feminist theory constructed by these intellectuals, as mentioned earlier, were heavily shaped by their own understanding of the political utility of feminism in the local context. For instance, Ravindran refers to Heidi Hartmann's work which critiques radical feminism and advances a theory of patriarchy and capitalism as intertwined but separate systems of oppression (p. 89). However, he prefaces this with entirely unsupported assertions:

> Socialist feminism, which is committed to the socialist revolution and women's liberation, has however, not yet attained clear philosophical positions even now. But still, the theoretical discussion that it generated has helped the scientific expansion of Marxist philosophy. Socialist feminism has forced Marxist social analysis to add as a link in the chain, the contradictions between men and women, which is the social division in the name of sexual differences.
>
> (89)

This assertion obviously ignores the rich debate between socialist feminists and between them and orthodox Marxists that Hartmann herself refers to in her essay (Hartmann 1979). More importantly, by implying that socialist feminist is a yet-to-mature discourse but one which serves to refine Marxism, it implicitly subordinates the former to the latter.

This did not mean that this dominance was not perceived or that it did not generate any discomfort. Feminist women often resisted attempts by male leaders of radical left groups to set the terms of activism and protest. There were open disagreements and breaks when the feminists felt that radical left groups were trying to project them as their 'women's wing'. In her interview for the IAWS archive, the prominent Malayali feminist Sarah Joseph recounted one such break, at the end of which the feminists were all branded 'petty bourgeois' by the radical left men. But from the beginning, tensions between women activists who emphasized the need to develop an adequate feminist praxis first, and men who insisted on the need to theorize this activity, were also evident. In her interview for the IAWS archive in which she recounted her association with feminism at that time, Sarah Joseph remembers the first formal meeting of the feminist group that she co-founded, Manushi in 1987, at a camp organized at Vavannur, where she confesses to have "shuddered" when she heard that this was an "organization for women's liberation". "It scorched inside [this news] . . . There was a great distance between trying to resolve women's issues from practical life and coming there [inspired by] theoretical reflections" (2011: 37). This further twist of the familiar activist/ideologue divide in feminism seems to have intensified especially, when it appeared that these radical men did not often practice what they preached. As a longstanding feminist activist recalled of the 1980s:

> Our house in . . . was the center of a lot of discussion around gender, but all this was mainly by our male friends, the so-called intellectuals of those days, two decades ago. Being part of all these discussions at home I increasingly felt that only women can articulate women's issues properly, thereby form this feminist group . . . But at the same time what I saw was that many male intellectuals who talked and discussed feminism led quite conventional family lives.
>
> (IAWS archive 2011)

It is instructive indeed to compare the narratives of feminist men and women in the IAWS narratives, particularly for their assessment of the importance of theory. While men find the stunting of theoretical discussions a major reason for the crisis of feminism, many women feel that there was often an overemphasis on theory or on Marxist feminism. Indeed, an activist of Prachodana recollected much later that the rift in Prachodana, which split after a year and a half, was precisely over this divide. "These women were very enthusiastic," she told Monica Erwer, "But their men had done more reading on feminism. So the men were controlling the group, so there was a rift coming" (Erwer 2003: 205).

The power differential between the woman activist and the male intellectual rarely came to fore, except, perhaps in the debate around feminist literature – *pennezhuthu*. Male feminists did share the understanding that feminism did need a 'high vocabulary' of relatively stable theoretical terms for it to gain space as sophisticated 'high thought' equalling Marxism within Kerala's extensive and vibrant intellectual public sphere (for example, Satchidanandan's introduction to the volume he edited, *Streepadhanangal*). However, feminist women often emphasized the need for an everyday feminist vocabulary adequate to challenge patriarchy in not just Kerala's public sphere, but also in women's everyday life worlds which lay beyond. This is well revealed, for instance, in the striking difference between Satchidanandan's understanding of Sarah Joseph's feminist literary writings as *pennezhuthu* ('woman writing') and her own understanding of the term. While he conceived it as reminiscent of the French feminist project of *ecriture feminine* (thereby igniting a furious debate) (Satchidanandan 1990), Joseph conceived *pennezhuthu* as a more simple and direct intervention in everyday language to cleanse it of misogyny and invent terms that would be more expressive of women's experiences (Joseph 2003).[5]

For feminist praxis to become powerful, the mutual energizing of these two languages would have been inevitable, but this happened only marginally. Indeed, the tasks vital to generating a feminist praxis here included making sense of patriarchy in the very specific everyday context of Kerala, naming it in a way that would capture the processes that shape it, its contemporary manifestations, and intersectionalities. In the absence of such a development, the emergence of a 'high vocabulary' for feminism and the thrusts towards a feminist everyday language remained largely separate. No wonder, then, even in 2004, that feminists in Kerala were still talking about

how difficult it was to pin down patriarchy in Kerala, how difficult it was to directly engage with it (Bygnes 2005).

Feminism in the 1980s in Kerala was a presence in other social movements also, notably in the independent fishworkers' movement (Dietrich and Nayak 2002), and the people's science movement, the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP). Especially in the latter, feminism took a very specific shape, described best, perhaps, as 'developmentalist feminism'. It was formed by largely middle-class women activists of the dominant left trade unions and mass organizations, who were uncomfortable with the intense male domination of these spaces. Further, they often identified leftist militancy and emphasis on public life to be deeply masculinist on the one hand and deeply hypocritical on the other because the male activists who professed these ideals more often than not enjoyed the advantages of regular home-life (Devika and Thampi 2012). 'Development activism' seemed to offer an alternative, a civil and respectable one, which was neither the much-reviled elitist 'charity work' nor the iconoclastic feminist activism. Nevertheless, feminist issues began to be raised within the people's science movement, taking the concern about gender beyond the worry about low female membership. There were, by the late 1980s, efforts to raise the question of patriarchy as a structural, and not simply normative, issue (Erwer 2003: 197–8). But these efforts met with limited success, and in general, 'developmentalist feminism' remained largely reformist-pedagogic, and exhibited greater readiness to work as a state-centric civil society.

Not surprisingly, the domination of male intellectuals in setting the terms of what counted as 'women's liberation' were equally or more visible in 'developmentalist feminism' as well. I was a direct participant in the inner struggles in the KSSP, resisting constant efforts by senior male leaders who had often direct links with Kerala's dominant left party, the CPM, to reduce feminism to terms acceptable to the CPM. Here too, the question was about the marriage of Marxism and feminism, but the power struggle was often between younger feminist women and senior Marxist men.[6]

In sum, the shaping of feminism, of its different strands, in the regional–local context of Kerala was such that the 'traditional' power of local male intellectuals – that of the early 20th-century Reformer-Man – remained largely undisturbed. Indeed, it appeared sometimes to be the reverse. The articulation of feminism in the late 1980s seemed to be yet another chapter in the triumphant history of the Reformer-Man's efforts to shape women in 'true' form.

Against this, the 1990s inaugurated a new time. It saw the arrival of 'gender mainstreaming' at a conjuncture in which global, national, and local developments figured. World Bank projects like the Urban Basic Services for Poor, political decentralization through the adoption of Panchayati Raj, as well as the CPM's own bid at 'transformative appropriation' of oppositional civil social challenges to its hegemony (Devika and Thampi 2012) formed the context in which gender mainstreaming was adopted. Along with the Beijing Conference, these developments led to the formation of a number of governance-spaces into which feminist women, from both strands of Malayali feminism, were invited. In the context of latent tension between men and women in feminism, over the perceived elitism of the 'high vocabulary' of male feminist theoreticians and the absence of a well-developed political vocabulary, the new governmentalized vocabulary of neoliberalized feminism (in which, for instance, 'gender' came to be translated as *lingapadavi*, and understood emphatically as the socially constructed male–female divide), which foregrounded 'women's empowerment', took the place of feminist everyday language, and this was supplemented by ambiguous coinages of the mass media (for example, *peedhanam* – a catch-all for everything ranging from unwanted touch to gang rape).

The consequences of this were not trivial. Indeed, while it allowed the shaping of a mainstream feminism into which feminists of the different strands of the late 1980s merged, it also disarmed feminism as an oppositional politics. Feminists were now increasingly viewed not as potential subjects of self-transformative politics but as agents of gender-equal development who needed 'capacity-building'. Far from representing counter-hegemony, mainstream feminism's understanding of gender was just a rehashed version of the male–female binary. In other words, unlike in the Anglo-American context, 'gender' did not have counter-heteronormative dimensions here; rather it merely tweaked immediate lived meanings, just to the extent necessary, to produce meanings useful for governmental intervention, and paid little attention to the structural conditions which shaped them.[7] In other words, in mainstream feminism, men were no more a prominent presence unlike in the late 1980s; but governmental masculinism was certainly triumphant!

Nevertheless, there were other ways in which men's implicit dominance in feminism was challenged, which actually led to greater democratization of Kerala's public sphere. One such was

already apparent in the *pennezhuthu* debate, in which many women authors whose writing was equally challenging of patriarchy, such as Chandramathy, Gracy, and Gita Hiranyan, expressed their deep misgivings about Satchidanandan's characterization of feminist literature. These objections seemed to be offered within a simplistic liberal humanist framework, or evoke a degree of culturalism, but these no doubt brought to light the theoretical confusion of Satchidanandan's introduction (1990) (it drew on both humanist and anti-humanist feminist literary criticism, without consideration of their differences) and the easy borrowing that it indulged in which did not seem mindful of the local cultural context. Many years later, Chandramathy referred to Satchidanandan's introduction as 'a gate bigger than the house'. In a literary public in which the very status of the literary critic was unquestionably masculine, and the power he enjoyed was indeed a version of the male reformer's, her criticism of Satchidanandan could well be read as resistance to such power.[8] Chandramathy's account of her own struggles to reach authorship indicates that she is not unaware that the liberal humanist critic also bears precisely such power. Her more recent interviews, too, seem to indicate that the discomfort, even if it was articulated in mainstream terms, was not so much about the feminist aesthetic that was being advanced, as the disturbing sense of prescription it carried, and the very masculinism of the homoaesthetic circle itself – of its internal hierarchies, modes of functioning, obligations. In a recent interview she reiterates her point that the discourse around critical women's writings ought to have been inaugurated by women themselves, and that her objection to the whole discourse around *pennezhuthu* was that it revolved around Man (Chandrika 2010: 46). She claims that the late 1980s and early 1990s were a time when women were:

> [b]reaking the fences and coming out. The times in which [one] wrote poems on pieces of paper and hid them under the pillow, to be discovered after [one's] death and published by heirs, were gone. We had begun to publish our writings. We would have written on a large scale even if we didn't receive enough attention from the critics. Women readers were beginning to recognize [in the writings of the women authors] – "this is my experience! This is my pain!" A consciousness that was more alert was slowly taking shape in those times. I feel, even

> if Satchidanandan hadn't downloaded such a term and introduced it, women's collectives would have formed. Maybe such a term would have been forged by a woman. If so, it would have been accepted. Welcomed.
>
> (Chandrika 2010: 48–9)

Chandramathy's reference to the possibility of a new connection that could have emerged between women writers and readers is worth noting. And as Chandramathy points out, "the name is gone, but the idea has become strong" (49), indicating that the critical aesthetics proposed then has grown, and does not function now as a straightjacket. In fact we need to acknowledge the full political significance of the resistance put up by Chandramathy, Gita Hiranyan, and other women authors to *pennezhuthu* as the rejection of consecration/silencing of feminist literary writing within the radical left.[9] It may also be possible to argue that the remarkable rise of women's critical writing since the early 1990s owes much to this willingness to strike it out alone.

And even as men in feminism no longer enjoyed presence in governmentalized, mainstream feminism, they were also being subjected to much closer criticism in the new sexuality politics emergent in the post-millennium. One of the biggest controversies in the Malayalam literary public in these years was over the sex worker-activist Nalini Jameela's decision to disown a version of her autobiography prepared with the help of a male intellectual-activist (which was an all-time best-seller in Malayalam publishing) and write her own, since she felt that he had constructed her too close to his own ideal and so the account was simply not truthful enough (Jameela 2007; Devika 2006).

Other developments – such as the rise of academic feminism in Malayalam which took over many tasks that male feminists had once handled, the entry of a very large number of young women into higher education (Kodoth 2010), the possibility of closer ties with feminist women in the Malayali diaspora, the possibility of young women students migrating to metropolitan universities – have made Malayali feminism almost irreversibly trans-regional and transnational. The relatively better visibility of LGBTQ+ politics post-millennium has had an important impact on critical thinking on gender in general, and has brought masculinities into critical view (for a detailed account of recent articulations of the different strands of sexuality politics, see Muraleedharan 2014).

## *II*

Clearly, from this account, it seems that question of men in feminism in any society is deeply connected to the specific histories of gender and contestation around it. Indeed, this even shapes the very question: Is it men 'in' feminism, or men 'and' feminism, or indeed men 'doing' feminism? For Kerala, it is apparent that the question was, initially, of men 'doing' feminism, and in a way directly linked to the history of social and community reform in which men with reformist inclinations laid claim to agency and sought to shape the subjectivities of women. Radical left feminist men of the late 1980s seemed to be but a variant of this Reformer-Man but unlike in the early phase of social and community reformism or the intermediate phase of developmentalist conformism, feminist women were less willing to accept his authority. Radical left intellectuals' efforts at translating feminism did create a new vocabulary for feminism that gained considerable circulation at the upper echelons of the Malayali public sphere. However, this concern overshadowed feminist women's demand for translation between the different layers of Malayalam and the Malayali public sphere, and between the public sphere and the everyday outside it. The intensive focus on Anglo-American feminism also seemed accompanied by a curious blindness to the insights of other regional feminisms grappling with similar problems.[10] The void left in everyday language was however to be quickly filled by the end of the 1990s with the vocabulary of 'women's empowerment' that engulfed the state in the high tide of governmentalized feminism in the drive towards gender mainstreaming post-Beijing Conference. The 'invited spaces' opened up in governance did not really offer space to male feminists, while feminists of different sorts now entered it. However, the authority of the male feminist came to be challenged in other, more political, ways, in the Malayalam literary public. This, along with the increased articulation of academic feminism in Malayalam, has definitely helped to further the democratization of the Malayali public sphere.

Yet it is important to see that the critiques that arose from sex workers' activism and anti-heteronormative positions in the 1990s targeted not male feminists but also women activists who donned the garb of the Reformer who sought to impose a majoritarian schema of gender on marginalized identities. In other words, as male feminism gradually grew inconspicuous in the Malayali public, the

critique of masculinist feminism grew all the more conspicuous. By 'masculinist' one means here a characteristic perception of power and position, and epistemological stance that men and women are expected to take in order to be accepted as 'feminist'.[11] Thus, it became apparent by now that patriarchy in feminism did not need embodied men; but it is also worth asking if it was not the very decline of male feminism itself that made such a development possible.

Nevertheless, the intense and violent masculinism that underlies the early 20th-century social and community reformism was unmasked decisively only very recently, perhaps. I refer to the Kiss of Love actions of 2014–2015 which unfolded against renewed Hindu right-wing attempts at moral policing in public spaces: it does not surprise me that their epicenter was in Kerala. The early debate on gender in the Malayali public sphere seemed to have run its course by the early 1950s (though outside, non-heteronormative practices persisted for much longer). The mid-20th century was, on the one hand, the era of the even-more-insistently heteronormative egalitarian developmentalism that emerged from the left-hegemonized Malayali national popular. On the other hand, it was also the period in which the new order of nations that emerged after the Second World War made possible a form of transnational belonging for migrant Malayalis that ultimately contributed to the ossification of modernized caste-community identities (Devika 2013b). Feminism in the 1980s challenged these only partially. The LGBTQ assertions in Kerala are a far more serious challenge to the 20th century new elite social consensus over gender and sexuality, and they continue to struggle hard to gain visibility and voice.

The Kiss of Love actions were undertaken by a 'negative community' and were defined as 'against moral policing'. The acts themselves do not privilege any kind of sexual orientation, and indeed, in their representations, do include anti-heteronormative acts of love quite prominently. Most importantly, they are directed against the super-masculine – identified simultaneously as moral police, state violence/restrictions, and sexual harassers – which oppress women and men alike. Though the moral police/sexual harassers in Kerala well exceed the defenders of ossified community boundaries, sexual orientations, and gender identities, Kiss of Love actions identify the former with the latter in a concrete sense, and they constitute an unambiguous rejection of entrenched masculine ideals. They signal

that the era of Reformer-Man is now reaching its end, with its underlying masculinity completely exposed.

The question of men 'doing' feminism seems to be as passé in Kerala as it is in the Anglo-American context, but that does not mean that embodied men have no role to play. The growth of masculinity studies as a field in Malayalam, and the rejection of gender and sexual binaries, open new, non-hierarchical possibilities. They reject the reformist project, but continue to point to feminism as an important resource and ally in men's struggle against pervasive masculinisms that oppress men as well. The last decade has thus seen both despair and hope: the apparent decline of organized feminism, but the rise of a new feminist public discourse and action that rejects the majoritarian schema and opens up feminism to new minoritarian imaginations. 'Men' may then figure no longer as a majoritarian term in the Deleuzian sense (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) – indeed, it could well be re-thought and proposed as a minoritarian term, still open and becoming.

## Notes

1 The 'Kerala Model' refers to a distinctive history of social development in Kerala, in and through which very high social development indicators were achieved by Kerala, by the 1970s, despite very poor economic development. Women are often identified to have been major agents and beneficiaries of these gains. See Jeffrey (2003).
2 For such an argument, see Jeffrey (2003).
3 I conducted a total of 16 interviews with feminists, male and female, from Kerala which were meant to start a 'snowballing archive' around a key event in the history of the Indian women's movement, the fourth national conference of Indian women's movements, held at Calicut in 30–31 December 1990. This work was supported by the Indian Association of Women's Studies in 2011. The archive is still unpublished.
4 Quite different from feminist accounts by women elsewhere and later. See Sen 2000; John 2008; Menon 2012.
5 I have argued elsewhere that Satchidanandan's introduction of Sarah Joseph's short stories, in which this term appears, exhibits classic features of a strategy followed by male-dominated and masculinist literary criticism in modern Malayalam literature, which I call 'consecration'. In this sense, male feminism in Kerala seems to have carried forward the early 20th-century Reformer-Man's project with minimal modifications of course. Devika 2012.
6 My own parting with KSSP was out of sheer exasperation with this hierarchy and the attendant blindness. It was around a book I was to write with a senior male intellectual of the KSSP on the theme 'women

and science' – and of course it was not really clear whether I was to be really co-author or assistant. I was to produce a draft chapterization which I did, after a lot of painstaking work. However, the senior intellectual was utterly dismissive of any mention of 'feminist critiques of science' – he did not believe them to be possible, since science was always 'objective'. He did not feel the need to rethink the naïve Bernalian perspective on science which was still guided the KSSP.

7 An important consequence of this was the inability of mainstream feminism to engage democratically with anti-heteronormative activisms and sex workers' mobilizations (Muraleedharan 2014).

8 I have also argued that the predominant sociological institution that formed Kerala's literary public was the 'homoaesthetic circle', which allowed for male bonding between male writers, critics, readers, editors, etc. The power of the literary critic is likely to have been much less apparent in such institutions. Devika 2012.

9 In a related but distinct vein, G Arunima has argued that the *pennezhuthu* debate was about not so much feminist writing as internal quarrels of homoaesthetic circles: "The real adversaries here are the men within the literary establishment – women's writing really becomes a site for contestation – not about feminism or women's rights, but about what constitutes masculinity itself" (2003: 119).

10 Susie Tharu and Lalita (1993) reviewed available frameworks of feminist literary criticism and advanced pointed critiques of both Showalterian gynocriticism as well as the French feminist *ecriture feminine*. Their keen sense of location is rather missing in Satchidanandan's theoretical reflections in the introduction which he wrote for Sarah Joseph's short stories, while it is conspicuous in his analysis of these texts.

11 Clearly akin to 'masculinism' in science as understood by feminist philosophers of science, say, Evelyn Fox Keller (1985).

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Chapter 6

# A feminist journey

## Population and health in post-feminist times

*Mohan Rao*

> *It was in the air . . . this hatred of women and their bodies – it seeped in with every draught in the house; people brought it home in their shoes, they breathed it off their newspapers. There was no way to control it.*
>
> (Smith 2005: 197–8)

On 16 September 2015, the *Times of India* carried a news item announcing the decision of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to introduce the injectable long-acting contraceptive Depo Medroxy Progesterone Acetate (DMPA, also known as Depo) in the family planning programme. Since I have been involved in a long-drawn campaign against this, it was time again to get in touch with friends from women's groups and health groups to mobilize. I did this with a sense of tiredness and despair; as the French have it, *plus ça change, plus c'est la mêmechose* (the more things change, the more they remain the same). But it also provided me an opportunity to reflect on my own involvement, as a feminist, with these groups over a period of time, although of course we live today in post-feminist times (Fien 2009). What I attempt to do in this chapter is discuss my involvement as a public health worker with feminist groups in India in quest for reproductive justice. In this process of course my own academic work has been enriched by feminism. I do not do this as an interloper, or as a man 'doing feminism', but as someone who shares feminist values and attempts to practice them.

Public health work in India cannot of course be divorced from concerns about the population issue for concerns, indeed anxieties and fears, about population have been a hallmark of public health policy in India over more than a century. In the late 19th century,

population growth was adduced as the reason for the famines that haunted colonial India. With utterly no evidence then of population growth, it was also cited as the reason for poverty in the country as early as the first census in the country (GOI 1893). As we see later in this chapter, too many children were also cited as the main reason for the poor health of women. And population concerns were also at the heart of the science of eugenics that took root in India, as elsewhere in the world, and went on to influence population policy. This was the idea that the poor and disabled bred too much and that this was not good for the health of the race or the nation, amounting to racial suicide or dysgenics. In India concerns with race and racial improvement came with concerns about caste and were soon tied in with concerns about masculinities, or the lack of appropriate masculinities in substantial sections of Indian men. Those classified as belonging to the non-martial races set about on racial improvement to more masculinist visions of their colonial oppressors or the Muslim or the Sikh, quintessential "martial races" (Sinha 1995). Tied in here were also concerns about the profligate breeding of the over-masculine Muslim male and the over-fertile Muslim female, threatening a Hindu nation in the making. So a range of concerns and anxieties went into the shaping of population policy. Only most marginally were feminist concerns invoked. Yet it is with feminist concerns that public health workers and women's groups have been battling the population establishment in India and globally. This coming together of health groups and women's groups has remarkably enriched the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) and the Medico-Friends Circle (MFC), for example. This chapter is very hesitant and tentative in nature. It is so because I had enormous problems writing it since I could not write in the personal mode, nor did I maintain a diary to record significant events in the battles we have fought. For the most part, we rushed from one battle to another, almost always losing them. Feminist concerns for justice and the making of a gender-just world have infused our struggles. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first briefly traces some of the concerns that shaped population policy, and the second my involvement with women's groups in the fight for reproductive justice. Let me also make it clear that I was not the only man involved in these struggles; many of us were, whether or not we saw ourselves as feminists. What is perhaps striking is that there were indeed men involved in these struggles who did not see themselves as feminists, unlike me.

## I

In 1938 the National Planning Committee, under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru, appointed a Sub-Committee on Health, chaired by Col. Sokhey, to make suggestions on health policy. The Sub-Committee on Health also considered, quite naturally, the question of population and maternal and child health. At a time when no nation in the world sponsored a family planning programme, Laksmibai Rajwade forcefully argued the case for the inclusion of "birth control, provision of goods, instructions, demonstrations and consultations" in maternal and child health services. Birth control, she argued:

> is obviously a very important function in view of the fact that the high mortality among mothers and children is in part due to too frequent pregnancies involving a terrific strain on the nerves and on a vitality already abnormally low. Children are born not as a creative evolutionary response to the vital urge, but as brittle standardised products of a tired reproductive machinery automatically set in motion by the sexual act. The reproductive system has to be kept fresh and vitalised to respond creatively and must not therefore be subjected to that strain. That can only be done by controlling pregnancy by contraceptive methods.
>
> (NPC 1948a: 133)

Calling for the creation of a "comprehensive medical service financed wholly by the State, available to all persons" (NPC 1948a: 158), Rajwade pointed out that

> to keep up the interplay of life and death about 20 mothers have to starve or poison themselves to death for every thousand of births; that out of the thousand born at such awful cost nearly 175 to 200 die before they are a year old; that on the scarred survivors of this stupendous ordeal is laid the responsibility of reproducing and building up their race in this land.
>
> (NPC 1948b: 119)

The Sub-Committee also favoured birth control in the interests of the development of the nation, thus linking individual and family behaviour to national growth and indeed the teleology of progress

and welfare. The nation-state was conceived of as a body, composed of physically and morally healthy citizens to which all must contribute (Zachariah 2001). This could be achieved through reproductive prudence, harnessing bodies not just for the economy but a sublime, and sublimating, nation-state. Thus the Sub-Committee on Population, for example, which called for birth control on eugenic grounds and on the grounds of the health of women, called for "self-control" along with birth control. It also recommended inter-marriages "for eugenic and other social reasons" (NPC 1948b: 208).

The Sub-Committee on Population observed that

> the Indian people are deeply religious, and limitation of family is earnestly believed to be in contravention of Divine Commands. Mahatma Gandhi, also, has thrown his weight in the same scale, making a formidable obstacle to the adoption of any programme of eugenics, organically devised and systematically applied throughout the country.
>
> (NPC 1948b: 6)[1]

But noting that intelligence seemed to be declining in the general population, science could be harnessed to do something:

> If we desire that this stage of intellectual development should be altered radically, and that man should rise to the full stature of his inherent powers of mind and body, cultivation of the race would have to approached from an entirely different angle than from that concerning mere numbers . . . more attention should be paid to improving the caliber of the race.
>
> (NPC 1948b: 7)

It went on to say that defective genes

> produce a large variety of defects and disabilities. Their influence can be felt in various types of blindness, deaf-mutism, muscular atrophy, fragility of bones, feeble-mindedness, insanity and epilepsy. The effective remedy that is now being adopted in some countries for such cases is sterilization.
>
> (p. 79)

The Committee recommended that it is necessary "that measures should be passed to legalise sterilizations of persons showing one or

more of the following conditions: insanity, feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, and criminality" (p. 87). Indeed, it saw in such sterilization the answer to the problems of illegitimacy and prostitution.

The National Planning Committee's Sub-Committee on Women's Role in Planned Economy resolved:

> The health programme of the state shall aim at the eradication of serious diseases, more especially such as are communicable or transmissible by marriage. The state should follow a eugenic programme to make the race physically and mentally healthy. This would discourage marriages of unfit persons and provide for the sterilization of persons suffering from transmissible diseases of a serious nature, such as insanity or epilepsy.
>
> (NPC 1948c: 114)

The fact that ideas of birth control was accepted with such ease testifies to the great influence, indeed the popularity, of eugenic ideas among Indian elites. But the fact that in India, unlike in England, there were no legal proscriptions on birth control helped matters considerably. Indeed, as the Census Commissioner, appreciating the work of the Neo-Malthusian League in Madras, wrote in 1932:

> A definite movement towards artificial birth control appears to be taking place, perhaps less hampered by misplaced prudery than in some countries which claim to be more civilized; thus not only is artificial control publicly advocated by a number of medical writers, but Madras can boast of a Neo-Malthusian League, with two Maharajahs, three High Court judges and four or five men very prominent in public life as its sponsors.
>
> (Hutton cited in Srinivasan 1995: 16)

One important voice at this time, resolutely different, did not get heard. And that was Periyar's. Indeed, Margaret Sanger, 'the messiah of medicalised birth control', did not approach him during her triumphant tour of India to win friends and influence people for population control. This is not surprising for what he proposed was a feminist's dream, the virtual overthrow of patriarchy and what Sanger sought was eugenics. He rejected eugenic and neo-Malthusian arguments on entirely rational grounds, but equally strongly argued for birth control for women to enable them to

control their own lives, to break servitude to patriarchy, to caste, and indeed the family. Thus he wrote:

> There is a fundamental difference between our reasons for the necessity of contraception and those of others. That is, we say contraception is essential for women to be free and autonomous. They say it is essential for women's health, national economy and to prevent fragmentation and destruction of family property. First of all, whether a woman needs birth control or not should be entirely woman's decision. Secondly, the objective of birth control is not to control the growing population or to advance the economy, but to create an environment for women to have rights and decision making power.
>
> (cited in Anandhi 2000: 155)

While all these concerns more or less influenced evolving population policy, one central role was that of women's groups themselves. Early in the 1930s, the leading women's group in the country, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), had demanded access to contraceptives as a right. This was also a period of controversy over the reform of the Hindu families suggested by the Hindu Law Committee (GOI 1941). What is also extremely interesting is that in this discourse the troubled, indeed fraught ideas of Indian womanhood that had informed a range of nationalist debates in the 19th century, from age of consent to *sati*, had been eclipsed. In the colonial period Indian women had been objects of nationalist reformist agendas setting right what were conceived as the aberrations of the recent past; practices such as widow immolation and child marriages were evidence to the British that they did indeed have a civilizing mission among the barbaric and traditional Hindus. Extremely contentious debates had arisen about the new or modern Indian woman brought into being in a new Indian nation; a woman who was to be distinguished both from the materialistic un-Godly Western woman and the common Indian woman, superstitious and sexually promiscuous (Chatterjee and Riley 2001). This modern woman was to be a good woman, a chaste wife, a good mother, enlightened yet spiritual, who would participate in nation building through harnessing children as resources.

Thus the Indian family planning programme, conceived with Cold War neo-Malthusian concerns, birthed by Western population control institutions, was also tinged with feminist concerns,

namely a woman's right to control reproduction and indeed her body. What is also equally clear is that this was not even used as a rhetorical ploy in the policy, nor indeed in the MTP Act that was passed in 1971. What we have instead is women used as "targets in a centralized, top-down programme, driven with coercion". That this is "something like a war", the title of Deepa Dhanraj's remarkable documentary of the programme in 1991 is attested by the fact that military metaphors abound in the programme and policy documents. For example, the post of the ANM was created as an "infantry of the programme" (Raina 1988) while the Shrivastava Committee noted that the population problem had to be "fought on a war footing" (GOI 1975). This became especially the case when the lessons of the Emergency 'excesses' of the programme were learnt. Not that coercion in a so-called welfare programme led to the officially admitted 1,774 deaths (GOI 1978). Instead, the lesson learnt was that it was politically too costly to target men; women make easier targets. So, as the Working Group on Population Policy set up by the Planning Commission recommended in 1980, citing no evidence, that "since women are the best votaries of the programme", the programme "for the immediate future be increasingly centred around women" (GOI 1980: 36). Sterilization of women, in camps, such as the one in Chhattisgarh in November 2014 at which 13 women died, is at the centre of the strategy to reduce the birth rate in the country. The Chhattisgarh disaster was an 'accident' waiting to happen; but 12 women die every month due to sterilizations in our country. This focus on reducing the birth rate at whatever cost is foolish for many reasons. There is a substantial unmet need for health and family planning services. Second, the impetus to population growth comes from what is called population momentum that is generated by the age structure of the population. Meeting the unmet need for health and population services will automatically lead to the country achieving population stabilization. In other words, a coercive approach is not even necessary, let alone being immoral.

## II

Women's groups in India have been instrumental in bringing to the fore new discourses that were not on the agenda in international and national policymaking circles. These included critiques of population control, questions related to the safety of contraceptives

and the research that accompanied it, the use of women's bodies in Third World countries for clinical trials, and so on. They have also critiqued the priority afforded to population control in maternal and child health, while also critiquing the indexing of women's health to maternal health. Some of the most impressive critiques of the political economy of developmentalism in Third World countries and how that has impinged upon women's lives – and health – have also come from these groups. Thus the Cairo consensus, as it is called, came in for scathing criticism for neglecting the health consequences for women of ongoing macro-economic changes, even as they questioned international sisterhood.

My involvement with women's groups goes quite far back. I grew up reading Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Angela Davis, and Germaine Geer, among others, partly because everyone I knew was also reading them. All of them wrote on women's control over their own bodies. But I was struck by the fact that Angela Davis, a Black feminist, resolutely rejected the notion of "reproductive choice", a white bourgeoisie feminist term, in favour of "reproductive justice", although she did not use this phrase (Davis 2011). It is only later that the works of Indian feminists such as Kumkum Sangari, Uma Chakravarthi, Sharmila Rege, and others came to be standard reading. These writers and activists were later to become friends and comrades. These writers moved feminist concerns much beyond bodily ones, or the self-absorption and the solipsism of the personal is political that characterizes libertarian feminism, asserting also that the political must be gendered (Sangari 2015). In other words, that libertarian feminism, by focusing on the individual, ignores the structures that govern individual lives.

During my internship in Bangalore Medical College, I had questioned a practice, which I had been assured was the norm: the insertion of an IUCD, without a woman's consent, following the performance of an MTP procedure. I had also seen, and reacted to, how the poor in general, and Muslim women in particular, were treated in Ante-Natal clinics, and had come to be critical of population control in a rather instinctive way, in that it punished individuals for a social problem. This, despite the fact that my grandmother was an office bearer in the Family Planning Association of India in Bangalore and obviously came from a fairly privileged background.[2] I knew, of course, that both the health and the access to contraception that my family had stemmed from this background. I was briefly a member of a Marxist study circle, which was not

located in Bangalore Medical College, and therefore made it difficult for me to continue; medical colleges are not particularly conducive to any reading other than text books.

After my internship and residency, I worked in a small hospital in Kerala and it was here that I came to meet some Christian socialists and some activists from Medico Friend Circle. But after two years in this remarkable hospital, I moved away from a medical setting entirely, to be involved in community health projects in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. In 1982, the year I moved to New Delhi, and got married to a feminist, I also came in contact with two remarkable women, both feminists. One, Dr Imrana Qadeer, went on to become my PhD supervisor, a task she bore quite bravely on her fragile shoulders. Imrana was, like me, a medical doctor, but had ventured into public health, like me, in a quest for justice. Both of us were convinced that medicine only perhaps accidentally contributed to population health, and that medicine's concern with the individual body was perhaps not enough. Equally, we were both convinced that public health was above all politics, even before we had read Rudolf Virchow's heady words to that effect.

The other woman was the more formidable Dr Vina Mazumdar, called Vinadi, mentor, guide, and friend. I met her at the time women's groups were organizing to oppose a move to modify Sikh personal laws to permit levirate marriages. She had soon drawn me into the campaign against sex selection. Vinadi was infuriated with Dharma Kumar's position that sex selection would increase the worth of females and decrease the burden of dowry because diminution in the supply of females would raise the demand for women. From this it was not long before we were involved in the battles against population control. These were feminist battles, political battles.

Vinadi was one of the warmest people I had the good fortune to meet, greeted you with an embrace and forced you to read whatever she had just finished reading. If you were enraged about an injustice, you could share it with her, discuss it and then she would try and see what could be done about it. Above all, she always seemed to have time for you, whatever your concern was. She argued with you to convince you, occasionally she charmed you into doing something with her although you were hard pressed for time. Even more occasionally, she ordered you to do what she wanted. Vinadi's genius was her ability to bring together a group of people who wouldn't otherwise be allies over an issue and get them to be so.

The other influential person whom I met around this time, who also became a friend, was Brinda Karat. What I found remarkable was the work we did came glowing with warmth and friendship, despite being argumentative Indians. There were frequently other men in the meetings, Sabu George or Satish Agnihotri, discussing child sex ratios, or A. R. Nanda on population policy, but there were times when I was the only man in a room full of women. Not once did I feel out of place or excluded or odd. I don't think anyone gave it a thought. I did not for a moment feel I was an intruder in a female space since I was indeed a subject of feminist politics. When something medical had to be discussed, or public health concerns, Imrana and I or Amit Sengupta would be asked to make a presentation. Narayan Benerjee was also present at many of these meetings; he was the director of the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) where these meetings were frequently held.

My friendship and work with these groups started in earnest around the time of the Swaminathan Committee Report (GOI 1993). Given the critiques of the coercive family planning programme that had accumulated, some of which were by me, the report of the Swaminathan Committee set off a storm, and Vina Mazumdar was at the centre of this, nurturing it. She gave me two jobs, one to critique neo-Malthusianism – something I continue to do, albeit in a tired manner, all freshness gone. The second was to critique Herbert Risley and his ideas of race and community in India, something I have done only tangentially. Risley interestingly had something to say about the Bengali nose, puncturing pretentions to an Aryan heritage for the "effeminate" Bengali.

Somewhere around this time I came into contact with the remarkable Betsy Hartmann, first through her book *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs* and later with herself. She was another mentor and friend. It was around this time too that I also started working in close association with CWDS, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), and Saheli. Later, Sama was added to the list. We would meet at the CWDS office, in fairly large meetings chaired by Vinadi. Usually in addition to CWDS and AIDWA, the National Federation of Indian Womwn (NFIW), Saheli, Jagori, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Mahila Dakshita Samiti, Action Aid, and Sama were also present. Our critique of population control was tied to our notion that the focus on population ignored issues of effective population, namely how resources both globally and within the nation were consumed. It also stemmed

from our understanding that to focus on population without the provision of comprehensive health care by the state was to miss the woods for the trees. We were very clear that the way to proceed in order to obtain population stabilization was to focus on employment, wages, and food. Without these fundamentals, the focus on women as targets was not only coercive, it was also immoral. In a memorandum to the Expert Group, women's groups pointed out:

> that a population policy cannot, and should not, be reduced to one of demographic control only . . . for unfortunately today, women's reproductive capacity is being projected as the major threat to India's survival. Population functionaries regard women as inanimate beings whose desperate need for safe contraception can be used to force on them either sterilisation with inadequate follow-up, or unsafe and inadequately tested contraceptive technologies with no thought to their health.
>
> (CWDS 1997: 6)

The memorandum impressed upon the Expert Group the need for

> a firm position in protecting the democratic and human rights of millions of women in this country, whose poverty, powerlessness and lack of access to information and services make them victims not only of frequent pregnancies but also of unscrupulous measures at demographic control.
>
> (CWDS 1997: 8)

The women's groups sharply pointed out that the following measures were considered non-negotiables:

1 No quantitative targets, overt or covert.
2 No incentives/disincentives that seek to erode women's basic human or constitutional rights.
3 No invasive hormonal technology until the quality of health care services has improved to provide the necessary monitoring.
4 Contraceptive responsibility and contraceptive investment to be equally shared by, and on, men and women.
5 Full information on all side effects, need for after-care/monitoring, etc. on all contraceptives to be made available to all recipients. There may be a need for some penal provision for failure to do so (CWDS 1997: 9).

In another, more detailed, memorandum to the Expert Committee, it was pointed out that the government's population policy so far "had been one of fertility control, pursued relentlessly, and at times coercively, through three decades, bringing disrepute to the family planning programme, compromising women's health, and accelerating the already declining sex ratio" (CWDS 1997: 20). Pointing out that there should be an examination of the links between macro-economic policies and health and population policies, the memorandum notes:

> One important aspect of the present policies is the reduction in real allocations to essential services, which include the public distribution system and access to food, health, education etc. The privatization of health services and charging of user fees in government hospitals are going to further worsen the already fragile health profile of India's poor. Our experience indicates that the fast deteriorating position of women's health, indicated by malnutrition, anaemia, increased vulnerability to illness etc. is directly related to increased levels of poverty, lack of access to primary health services and not primarily to maternity related problems as perceived by official analysts. In this context, we consider the equation of health with family planning to be nothing short of criminal. The very fact that successive Five Year Plans have increased allocation and attention to family planning at the cost of basic health services to the extent of the former exceeding the latter in the Seventh Plan should make our point clear.
>
> (CWDS 1997: 22)

We were concerned about the kinds of contraceptives that were being often surreptitiously introduced in the name of reproductive choice. Like Angela Davis in the US context, we were also critical of the concept of reproductive choice, favouring the idea of reproductive justice that comes ensconced in wider social and economic justice. Representations were made to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) against the introduction of injectables and implants. Saheli and others took this matter to court and obtained a stay order. Women stormed into meetings at Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) to protest and sneaked into the offices of Upjohn, the manufacturer of injectables then, to protest. Representations were also made to the ICMR and demonstrations held

outside the Health Ministry. Today, after the Bilaspur tragedy, the population establishment, led now by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is vigorously pushing for the inclusion of injectables in the family planning programme in the name of widening the basket of contraceptives.

The year 1997 witnessed the launch of a campaign against the use of quinacrine, a synthetic anti-malarial, as an agent for the chemical sterilization of women. The proponents of quinacrine argued that in countries like India where women sought contraception and sterilization, but could not make these decisions due to powerlessness within their families, quinacrine offered a safe method of sterilization. Since it did not involve surgery and a scar, their families would not know that they had undergone sterilization. Indeed, it was argued that this therefore made it ideal for Muslim women. This same argument is now being repeated for injectables also. The two American proponents of quinacrine sterilization, Dr Elton Kessel and Dr Stephen Mumford, were interestingly members of an organization called Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). FAIR felt that immigration to the United States had to be restricted and that one way to do this was through population control in Third World countries. Dr Kessel was the founder of an organization named Family Health International which had been involved with questionable trials with Norplant in Bangladesh (Rao 1997). Dr J. K. Jain, a then-BJP member of Parliament, owner of Jain Studios and Jain Medical Centre in New Delhi, coordinated the supply of equipment and drugs to a number of NGOs and doctors in the country.

The ICMR which had commenced a trial with quinacrine had abandoned it due to a high failure rate. In reply to a question tabled in Parliament at the behest of AIDWA, the Minister of State in the Department of Legal Affairs stated that the Government of India was aware that the WHO had specifically recommended that, pending further trials, trials with humans be stopped forthwith. He stated that the Drug Controller General of India had not granted approval for clinical trials with quinacrine. The minister further stated that "no drug manufacturer has been granted licence to manufacture quinacrine and the drug is not imported" (Government of India 1997).

Yet thousands of women had been sterilized, in West Bengal and in Karnataka. None of the women were told that they were on a clinical trial.

A broad coalition of women's groups launched protests outside the clinics of the doctors involved in the trials in Kolkata and in Bangalore. In Delhi women's groups and health activists protested outside Dr Jain's clinic in South Extension. Saheli brought out an excellent monograph that contributed to newspaper editorials (Saheli 1997).

It was in this context that the AIDWA and the faculty of Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health (CSMCH) of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court for a ban on quinacrine sterilizations. On 16 March 1998 the Drugs Controller of India made a written commitment to the Supreme Court that quinacrine sterilizations would be banned with immediate effect by gazette notification. The Supreme Court was happy to close the case at this. It paid no heed to the prayer of the petitioners for follow-up and compensation to the victims of these 'trials', nor award punitive fines on the doctors performing them. Nor did the court consider taking appropriate steps necessary for strengthening institutions and mechanisms for the monitoring and regulation of public health research in the country, as the recent scandal of HPV vaccination painfully reveals. As a postscript, after the launch of the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan in Kolkata in 2000, at the first People's Health Assembly in Dhaka, Dr Mumford sought to hold a workshop regarding QS as an empowering form of contraception. He was barred from attending the event. This is significant in that, since the JSA was formed, it has been working with women's groups on health issues.

Around the time of the drafting of the National Population Policy 2000, the CWDS held a series of consultations on the child sex ratio and how the population policy contributed to its skewing. The Health Secretary then, Mr A. R. Nanda, was extremely sympathetic and participated in consultations organized by our Centre in JNU and Dr Devaki Jain's organization. I think it was partly due to the Cairo rhetoric, and partly to the efforts of health groups and women's groups, that the NPP explicitly advocates provision of services and rejects coercion. The reality was, of course, different. When state after state introduced a two-child norm for the contest of Panchayati Raj elections, we drafted a memorandum opposing it, presenting it to the Planning Commission and the Ministry, and a group of us met the Health Minister, then Mr Shatrughan Sinha. It helped a lot that Lotika Sarcar had written about this, and that she too could join our delegation.

The Supreme Court ruling on quinacrine had brought to light the limits of approaching the courts. On 30 July 2003, a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court of India upheld a Haryana Government law prohibiting a person from contesting or holding the post of a sarpanch or panch in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of the state if he or she had more than two children. The Bench observed that "disqualification on the right to contest an election for having more than two living children does not contravene any fundamental right, nor does it cross the limits of reasonability. Rather, it is a disqualification conceptually devised *in the national interest*" (Venkatesan 2003, p 1, emphasis added).

The Supreme Court ruled that

> Right to contest an election is neither a fundamental right nor a common law right. It is a right conferred by a statute . . . No fault could be found with the State of Haryana for having enacted legislation which is worth being emulated by other States. Provisions of section 175(1) (q) and 177 (1) are neither arbitrary nor discriminatory since the disqualification contemplated therein seeks to achieve a laudable socio-economic purpose and is in tune with the National Population Policy.
>
> (Lahoti 2003: 286)

We should note *en passant* that the NPP has no such provision. The Supreme Court went on to say, "the problem of population explosion is a global issue and provide justification for priority in policy oriented legislations wherever needed" (Ibid, p. 287).

But around this time, I was nominated to be on the Population Commission and, during the course of the Commission's extremely irregular meetings, raised these concerns. Not that it made a whit of a difference. For around this time emerged something called a Strategy Paper. Mysteriously unsigned, but circulated by the Planning Commission, it called for a radical strengthening of the programme by India emulating China. Again, mobilization followed and we staged a dharna at the Planning Commission, in addition to a memorandum. But luckily the 2004 elections intervened.

Vinadi also led a delegation to the National Human Rights Commission, then headed by Justice J.S.Verma. I remember Justice Verma, deeply sympathetic, was also concerned that our delegation was so old. Are not young people interested in the issues you are raising? he asked. Because what had occurred over the 1990s

was the NGOization of these issues and concerns, primarily by foreign resources flowing into HIV/AIDS and sexuality-linked NGOs, which were not interested in the wider issues raised by more movement-based organizations. But the NHRC did organize a national consultation where a NHRC Declaration was announced that explicitly called for a voluntary rights-based programme, with no incentives and disincentives. It specifically asked for the two-child norm for PRIs to be revoked.

We were also concerned that by concentrating on contraceptive acceptance in a patriarchy I had described as karvachaut capitalism, meant that it contributed to the devaluation of women and the disappearance of the girl child. We were therefore outraged when the UN institutions decided to hold a national consultation on female "foeticide" – a term which we as feminists abjure since it comes from the US so-called pro-life movement and is deeply anti-women and anti-abortion. Invited to this consultation were religious leaders, the pillars of patriarchy. Astonishingly, that author of the Babri Masjid demolition, Sadhvi Rithambara, was invited as a representative of Hindus. We decided to boycott this consultation and hold a dharna at the venue. We were aware that Hindutva groups also opposed the two-child norm but because they believed it contributed to the decline of Hindu populations as opposed to that of the Muslims. Similarly, we were conscious that the Hindu right's opposition to sex-selective abortion was also based on similar calculations. The anti-abortion rhetoric that the VHP deploys is part of the larger campaign about alleged Muslim hyper-fertility, their desire to outbreed Hindus in India and thus Islamize it (Rao 2014). It is argued in their resolutions that Hindus disproportionately utilize abortion leading to their de-population. At the same time this religious Right has also campaigned against Hindu women marrying Muslim men, the so-called love jihadists (Rao 2011).

With the widespread use of the term female foeticide, anti-abortion sentiments are fairly common now among upper-caste middle-class Indians – although I have no study to cite, not even a newspaper article. There is also talk that there are too many abortifacients being sold over the counter, like the morning-after pill. In short, moral danger stalks Indian youth, particularly women, and they should be protected. Imitating the United States, a moral majority is being constructed here too, although this is obviously more difficult in India than in the United States. And hence the "legitimacy" of khap panchayats and "honour killings" that Pratiksha Baxi has characterized as custodial murders (Baxi 2012).

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2004 was committed, through its Common Minimum Programme (CMP), to initiating measures that would arrest negative trends in health in the country, increasingly apparent since the early 1990s. Thus the CMP was committed to a substantial increase in health spending. The CMP, however, contained one alarming sentence: "A sharply targeted population control programme will be launched in the 150-odd high-fertility districts."[3] This sentence should not have been there at all if any one of the parties to the drafting of the CMP were convinced by the 'paradigm shift' represented by the NPP. Even worse, it was this single sentence from the CMP that triggered swift action – in the form of population policy measures for 209 districts – even before any programme of health under the new dispensation was announced. The plans announced however completely ignored these priorities. The measures proposed included huge sterilization targets for the selected districts, targets to be achieved by wrenching apart family welfare from health, under a single line of command, manned by retired military officers and bureaucrats, to provide the necessary 'will'. The sterilization targets were to be achieved through massive incentives to doctors in the private sector, who would, in addition, be guaranteed indemnity insurance by the state. Helping them attain the targets was to be a cadre of female 'community health volunteers', rather curiously named Accredited Social Health Activists, the hopeful acronym being ASHA.

Health and women's groups reacted sharply and swiftly, pointing out what should have been obvious. These 209 districts in which the "sharply targeted population control programme" was to be launched are precisely the districts with poor indicators for social development, especially female literacy, infant and child survival, maternal morbidity and mortality, and other indicators of human and gender development. Yet instead of a package of health and development measures, what was being proposed was a sharply targeted population control programme. As the health and women's groups pointed out, not only do such measures violate basic human rights, but also have been shown to be demographically unnecessary in bringing down population growth rates.

These groups therefore demanded that the programme measures for these 209 districts be unreservedly scrapped, noting:

> We cannot have a population policy that does not hinge on equity and gender justice. There should thus be no National

> Population Mission. Issues concerning women's health and reproductive rights can only be part of a larger package of a health and social development policy.[4]

For a change, these concerns apparently fell on receptive ears. This offensive document was withdrawn, even as the new government went into prolonged contortions drafting a National Rural Health Mission. The point to note is the swiftness with which a population project, almost fully worked out, could be announced, while that for health merely waited in the wings.

By now it was clear that it was not just amniocentesis or the ultrasound, but a whole range of new technologies were out, all offering eugenic choices, but also bringing dangers to the health of women. In order to understand this changed landscape of New Reproductive Technologies (NRTs), Imrana and I organized a national consultation in 2007, bringing in scholars from all the women's studies programmes in the country, and scholars and activists from India and abroad who had worked on these technologies, from pre-implantation genetic diagnostics to heterozygote screening and ultrasound and IVF. We also brought in legal scholars and ethicists. But even as late as 2007, we had not imagined that the NRTs would push India to becoming one of the global hubs of surrogacy or leading sites of stem-cell therapy-related tourism.

One point to be noted is that all these activities profoundly enriched the academic work that emerged, which had immediacy and freshness. Some of these found space in the remarkable volume edited by Mary John, *Women's Studies in India: A Reader* (John 2008). That this did not always influence policy is, of course, to be expected. What it did also do was that many of these writings entered academic spaces possibly for the first time. It also made teaching more exciting. Many of these writing entered courses like women's health in India or political economy of health taught in our Centre. This is important since feminism hardly figures in medical education or indeed even the education of demographers, to whom gender is but a binary variable. For example, there are only two feminist demographers, Sonalde Desai and Alaka Basu in India, and both are currently abroad.

Over the last 10 years however there has been a change as our involvement seems to have declined. This is partly because we have not been able to withstand, I think, the onslaught of both neoliberal and Hindutva forces. Concerns of the people, of women and

marginal groups, that we raise and continue to raise, find less and less space in public spaces. It is more than 10 years since I wrote anything for example that found publication in mainstream newspapers. These newspapers have themselves dispensed with journalists like, say, Kalpana Sharma or P. Sainath who covered such issues. What has also occurred is a NGOization of issues related to health in general and women's health in particular. A new set of INGOs have arrived on the scene, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, PATH, and so on, and thus have new NGOs speaking the language of 'choice' and 'empowerment'. As we become a more networked society, we have entered the age of internet protest. New communities of sufferers have come into being, such as the Positive People Network or Autism Society, each fighting its own little battle for funding and legitimacy. At the same time, democratic spaces have shrunk, as has discussion. The Indian is getting less argumentative, as A. K. Ramanjuan becomes anti-Hindu and his magnificent essay withdrawn from Delhi University, with hardly a squeak of protest. The corporatization of higher education has also meant that my younger colleagues will not have the opportunity to traverse the journey that I have. It has not been easy, but it has been richly enriched by feminism.

## Notes

1 Orientalist conceptions of India as an essentially religious civilization did not prevent India from becoming the first country in the world to have an officially sponsored family planning programme. Nor were religious voices raised when India passed the MTP Act in 1971. Contrast this to the struggles feminists have had to fight for contraception and for abortion in the United States. The truth of the matter is that imperialism saw population control as one way of stabilizing the world order, preventing over-populous countries from becoming communist.
2 My paternal grandparents had four children. My grandfather, paraphrasing someone, is known to have said the first child was welcome, the second was alright, the third was an accident, and the fourth, a tragedy.
3 These districts in the BIMARU states of the country are precisely the states that are also lagging in social and economic development and are characterized by poor health sector development and poor health indices. The BIMARU states are Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh; now with Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Orissa added to them. They have the worst rates of infant and child mortality, of maternal mortality, of levels of hunger in the population, and poor development of health institutions in the country.
4 Memorandum to the prime minister, dated 21 January 2005.

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Chapter 7

# On disloyalty

*Srimati Basu*

The mandate of this volume, to decide whether male scholars of feminist projects are putative "loyal interlopers" (the original prompt under which many in this volume assembled), requires us to put both loyalty and interloping under conceptual scrutiny. Interloping carries the whiff of demarcated territory, burglar alarms and passwords; loyalty, similarly, of pre-established affective responses to gain entrance to precious domains. The terms rely on a call to sacred belonging, to an in-group of shared belief and comfort, often based on a common identity deriving from kinship, gender, race or nationality.

Demands of loyalty have always irked me: the call to hush up family dirty linen to keep kin reputation pristine; the proscription against appreciating sports teams not identified as 'our own'; the danger of appearing 'anti-national' and patriotic when we critique State power; the implicit assent to 'forsake all others' (in conjugality or friendships) as the criterion of intimacies. My truant applause at the occasional university basketball game gets me in trouble with fan friends. Students look shocked when I ask them about the usefulness of patriotism and nationalist pledges of allegiance. My love of family scandals makes my relatives perennially nervous. These are not just attempts to make trouble or break out (although they may be that as well). Rather, we should not be confusing the privileges of being on the inside with loyal silence, nor assuming that there is a homogeneity of belief and identity within an affiliated group, nor forgetting the crucial role of critique in re-shaping spaces of belonging.

Feminism has been one of these enclosures: a place of belonging, identification and recognition that also, in many organized forms, insists on our assent to the core assumption that our sex and/or gender should be the (primary) basis for political solidarity. In the recent US elections, we were daily berated by senior feminists that

to not prefer a female candidate for President, whatever her politics and loyalties, is in effect to cheer for that other team: patriarchy. We could multiply this with innumerable political examples through time where gender is cited as the primary category of concern against interests of community, race or class.

My current research project treads delicate ground as well: I have been working on the unexpected legacies of Indian legal reforms of marriage and gendered violence established by feminist advocacy. I trace some of the ways women become more vulnerable to violence because the emphasis of law falls on marriage and alimony; criminal laws often serve primarily to shore up hegemonic advantages of marriage and kinship. In a recent ethnographic project, I have been interviewing so-called men's rights activists who direct the force of their media outreach and political mobilization against the effects of these reforms. The project seeks to focus on the social life of laws, in order to understand the limits of legal reform and the need for ongoing feminist revision. But its very task of approaching the perceived enemy can be seen as a challenge to hard-fought feminist gains, open to charges about 'loyalty' and 'conversion.' These examples revolve around valences of critique, loyalty and insider status, and in these latter cases, meanings of gender.

Identity – both epistemological bases/standpoints grounded in identity and rights and recognition based on identity – is ever more crucial in cultural, political and social life. We are assumed to speak from (and only from) our locations – but while these currencies may facilitate certain negotiations and conversations, they may also be limitations. To take the two (interconnected) worlds in which I primarily live, work and affiliate, in the US and India, the last couple of years have insistently reminded us that it is possible both to interpellate identity categories with some fluidity, and that structural and material constraints have palpable, deathly effects. Dictionary.com chose "identity" as its 2015 word of the year to reflect the marked increase in searches for words related to identity politics. Wesley Morris, the New York Times critic, nominated 2015 as "The Year We Obsessed over Identity,"[1] describing it as "a great cultural identity migration" in which "Gender Roles are merging. Races are being shed . . . we've been made to see how trans and bi and poly-ambi-omni- we are." The positive publicity surrounding Caitlin Jenner's sex change from having been super-athlete Bruce Jenner would indicate a cultural willingness to understand bodies as unfixed, even as socioeconomic privileges mediate her

optimal transition compared to the medical resources available to poor transgendered people. But simultaneously, other contestations of race – whether Rachel Doalzal could be Black in affinity, performance and politics if not in genetic makeup, how much Cherokee Andy Smith ought to be to speak on Native American issues – indicate a profound unease around the epistemologies of identity, around the salience of biology and its relationship to social locations and hence political consciousness. Kai Green, situating themself as a transgender Black man, challenges this unease, refusing the politically correct response that Rachel is not "really" Black while Caitlin is "really" a woman by pointing to the messiness of strategic identity and biology and the need to reckon with uncomfortable claims: "Race and gender are not the same, but they are both bio-social-historical categories that help to facilitate and enforce the unequal distribution of power and wealth under capitalism."[2] Meanwhile, the obvious precarity of certain racialized lives – from police violence against African-American men personified as menacing in the most quotidian of contexts, or the perception of Muslims as embodying threat – incessantly remind us that identity is far from being a malleable choice, depending on one's structural location.

In India, meanwhile, Jats, Marathas, Patels and Gujjars are agitating to be considered OBCs, citing a low position in formal caste hierarchies as the basis of being considered for caste-based reservations in education and employment set aside for socioeconomically marginalized groups.[3] Their claims seem strange given their access to local political and land capital — in particular rural contexts, they are exemplars of sociologist M.N. Srinivas' category of "dominant caste," in contrast to textbook "high caste" status (1956). However, these privileges may be eroded by social class or urban hegemony; these groups thus cite formal caste hierarchies rather than structural conditions in order to claim benefits from the State. The political agitation demonstrates the differing valences of caste-based marginalization claimed as currencies of negotiation – caste as an ascribed category of religio-cultural abjection, a site of deep economic vulnerability, or an identity meriting compensatory reparations from a (caste-hegemonic) postcolonial state. (Similarly, Affirmative Action in the US seeks to address structural disadvantage as well as lack of recognition, but has been challenged by those who believe it thereby discriminates against white individuals by favoring race over class, a claim that refuses to grant validity to the optics of race or to group structural disadvantage.) Scholars

cite caste identity as a site of authoritative knowledge and access, as exemplified by Ananya Vajpeyi's covert challenge to Arundhati Roy's introduction to *The Annihilation of Caste* by B. R. Ambedkar.[4] But in other work, Vajpeyi shows recognition of the political instrumentality of caste, such as the ways in which majoritarian Hindu nationalism simultaneously positions itself in terms of both religious and caste exclusivity, using violence to protect these hegemonic identities and hence privileges.[5]

Rohit Vemula's suicide trenchantly reminds us of the intransigence of caste violence. Vemula rejected caste quotas in his own biographical and educational reckonings; he identified with Dalit movements and was a member of Ambedkar Students' Association on the basis of political and affective affiliations.[6] His involvement in progressive student politics such as protests against the death penalty to Yakub Menon and of the (Hindu nationalist affiliated) ABVP student group's disruption of the screening of *Muzaffarnagar Baki Hai* indicate his critique of the violence of the State across complex intersections of caste, religion and nation. The ABVP used these positions to allege anti-nationalism, followed by academic suspension and expulsion from housing. In the wake of his suicide, the media (and the public) obsessed over a precise parsing of his caste identity, largely ignoring his associational solidarities. Rohith's poignant suicide note stands as an accusation of the politicization of identity in its narrowest form, of the failure to conceptualize a being when one is read only in terms of their ascribed location: "The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living."[7]

This essay seeks to trouble singular loyalty, by way of thinking about the call to men's loyalty as a test of feminist alliance/solidarity. It does so by questioning the status of gendered identity as a basis of epistemology (and hence politics), in the wake of theoretical complications such as intersectionality and its critique of gender as a singular criterion (Crenshaw 1991), poststructuralist understandings of identity as being strategically performed in discursive contexts (Butler 1993), and notions of variable sex-gender systems (Rubin 1975). I propose a (renewed) emphasis away from gender-based identity toward the goal of reflexive contributions to feminist political projects, where critique is a vital dimension for troubling political identity.

## 'Men' (and 'Women') in Feminism

Re-reading Alice Jardine and Paul Smith's *Men in Feminism* (1987) anthology as I worked on this chapter was a sweet trip down memory lane. The last time, it was 1988, a graduate Feminist Theory seminar in the English department taught by a senior male professor who specialized in social theory, probably had good intentions towards feminism. A full class, with lots of women (many not particularly feminist in leaning), and some men (many of whom proclaimed their feminism at great length). We read Florence Howe's *Myths of Coeducation(1985)*, Elaine Showalter's *New Feminist Criticism (1985)* and *New French Feminisms* (1987) edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron – these too were books heavily concerned with sexism, patriarchy and the differences between men and women as well-defined categories. I remembered being exhilarated at my liberation from required lit classes, entranced into hours of reading beyond the assigned material, new to thinking about sexism as archetypal oppression and to Indian women as archetypal victims of patriarchy.

*Men in Feminism* seems in retrospect to be a smart choice in this bibliographic company, though it was more confusing at the time: it straddles deconstructionist work drawing on language and positionality, and poststructuralist considerations of power and identity. It understands gender as a category co-constituted through biological, symbolic and material vectors, but dwells on the political implications of speaking from pre-given gendered locations. Paul Smith's essay defines the provocation as one of evaluating whether men should speak in feminism, and whether their speaking can be of use: "Perhaps the question that needs to be asked, then, by these men, with them, for them, is to what extent their irruption (penetration and interruption) is justified? Is it of any political use to feminism? To what extent is it wanted?" (Jardine and Smith 1987, 33). Stephen Heath suggests that "men's relation to feminism" is a categorically impossible one: "the point after all is that this is a matter for women, that it is their voices and actions that must determine the change and redefinition. . . . Women are the subjects of feminism, its initiators, its makers, its force; the move and the join from being a woman to being a feminist is the grasp of the subjecthood. Men are the objects, part of the analysis, agents of the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of the patriarchal mode; and my desire to be a subject there too in feminism – to be a feminist – is

then only also the last feint in the long history of their colonization" (Jardine and Smith 1987, 1). If women are by definition the only permissible authorities of feminism, and men in no position to be authentic subjects, then the only positions they seem to be able to occupy seem to be of supplement and support, a number of essays suggest. Alice Jardine locates the problem as one of dissonant voice, that male feminists fall short not in content but "as if they have learned a new vocabulary perfectly, but have not paid enough attention to syntax or intonation . . . their bodies would seem to know nothing of the new language they've learned" (Jardine and Smith 1987, 56). It calls on them to undertake "serious work" rather than "to mimic us, to become the same as us"(Jardine and Smith 1987, 60). Men are assigned specific homework in certain areas and approaches and proscribed from "talking about feminism/women/femininity/female sexuality/female identity/etc."(Jardine and Smith 1987, 60). Heath propounds a relationship of "fundamental *admiration*" based on an Irigarayan "ethic of sexual difference" (Jardine and Smith 1987, 31).

These essays represent a good-faith effort to grapple with identity, including its contradictions and politics. The debate is firmly placed within a gender binary, 'men' and 'women' taken to be solid identities with no reference to forms of race, class, nation or sexuality affecting gender. The conversation, in other words, is all about demonstrating loyalty *to* feminism, indicated in the call to play admiring and not agentic roles. The doubts are about incipient betrayal or falling short, as Jardine's metaphor of lack of native linguistic fluency indicates. Many scholars since have critiqued the volume for its biological essentialism (Digby 1998), and its inability construct men (or women) through an intersectional lens which notices their differences.

Sex and gender would soon be viewed as more complicated, with the two terms as continua rather than binaries, co-constitutive of each other. A foundational approach in this context has been that of biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling. Fausto-Sterling's "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are Not Enough" (1993) posed a fundamental challenge to the settled notion of a gender binary, arguing that the scientific assignment of binary sexual characteristics comes from a prior social construction of gender. She argued that we try to fit a range of inevitable bodily variations into notions of male and female bodies. *Sexing the Body* (2000) followed with a systematic analysis of scientific techniques that illustrated how knowledge

about bodies (sex organs, brains, hormones) is constructed through questions which assume male-female binaries. This non-intuitive point that gender is epistemologically prior to sex, and that our ideas of gender define our categories of sex, corresponds to the influential philosophical work of Christine Delphy (1993) and Judith Butler (1993, 2006).

Gender too is a continuum that relies on notions of sexual difference, mapped along axes of labor, property, embodiment or sexuality. Each culture has a "sex-gender system," to use Gayle Rubin's useful formulation (1975), with specific arrangements of labor, kinship, gender and sexuality producing subjectivities and socialities. Favorite anthropological examples in this context include Ifi Amadiume's work on "male daughters" and "female husbands," showing that certain Igbo women could choose to be sons and to take wives, to have male access to the work and reproductive capacity of other women (but not *be* men) (1987), or Antonia Young's study of "women who become men," Albanian women who are dubbed "sworn virgins" because they forswear sexual activity and adopt normative male gendered behaviors and actions, thereby laying claim to economic privileges such as property (2001). Some of the most compelling examples of the fluidity of gender categories come from South Asia. Lucinda Ramberg follows the lives of *devadasis/jogatis* in Karnataka who are on the one hand quintessentially feminized in being given in sacred marriage to Yellammma, but inherit and bequeath property and assume financial responsibility as sons to their households. Yellamma herself shifts gender across various narratives (2014). Gayatri Reddy's research on hijras in Hyderabad identified over a dozen terms for gender within the community, varying by gendered presentation, sexual practices and social locations (2005).

These disparate bodies of gender studies scholarship remind us of the fluid possibilities of sex and gender. Feminist theoretical approaches would benefit from dwelling in these expansive notions rather than relying on sex and gender as stable commonsense categories. By extension, "male" feminists would vary in their affiliations according to the cultural categories of maleness within which they locate themselves, and in the feminisms they prioritize based on those gendered identities, or from other locations of identification or interest, as explored in the following section. Masculinity may stand in a hierarchical relationship to femininity in many contexts, but both are crisscrossed by permutations of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities and femininities.

## Masculinity 2.0: How Many Masculinities are There?

A corollary to the idea that gender and sex occupy fluid continua is that 'gender' is inevitably imbricated within categories of class, caste, race, religion, nationalism, etc. That is, we experience gender from our other social locations, in conjunction with global and local discourses filtered through media, communities or educational systems. Masculinities range from hegemonic political identities to marginal positions.

A look at any range of Indian men who are political figures, athletes, movie stars, media figures, or literary characters reveals the making of masculinities through privilege and vulnerability, some overdetermined and others unmarked. The aggressive mobilization of Hindutva masculinity is defined in relationship to the construction of Muslim men as polygynous, zealous and menacing, encompassing fetishes such as PM Narendra Modi's 56 inch chest as an icon of power (Banerjee 2005, Anand 2007, Basu 2016).[8] Farhan Akhtar uses his status as mellow intellectual movie-star to scold patriarchy and advocate for women's rights, ironically growing a moustache to mark his commitment to being the UN Goodwill Ambassador for women in South Asia.[9] Gender is often learned, incorporated and transmitted in contexts which only obliquely refer to gender-marked difference, for example through forms of interpersonal identity formation or homosocial bonding: Rahul Roy's film *When Four Friends Meet* (Magic Lantern Films, 2000) or Sanjay Srivastava's ethnographic work on footpath pornography (2013) illustrate these processes of gender formation masterfully. Pedagogies of gendered citizenship are front-and-center in examples such as Srivastava's earlier work on national character developed in elite boys' boarding schools (1998), or Lalit Vachani's documentary *Boy in the Branch* about training in Hindu fundamentalism (Wide Eye Films, 2002). Joseph Alter's exploration of bodily habitus has ranged from examining Gandhi's obsessions around food, sex and medicine (2000) to the Himalayan farmer Dildas' memories of hunting and friendship with American boys (1999) to the notions of moral reform internalized by wrestlers and the moral regimes of other athletes such as gymnasts (1992, 2011).

Women are constituted through similar processes. Feminisms, for one, occupy a range of theoretical and political positions, from feel-good Liberal empowerment exemplified in Sheryl Sandberg's

*Leaning In,* to Radical Feminist Islamophobia to what Razack (2008) calls *radical feminist Islamophobia* (e.g. Chesler 2017), both of these terms making use of class, race and religion to shore up the case for the predominance of gender discrimination. In South Asia, between families killing abducted daughters during Partition, Indira Gandhi's schemes of reproductive coercion, domestic violence involving mothers-in-law and other women alongside men, and the violent avengers of Durga Vahini, surely we have been cured of lauding femininity for its own sake long ago? Upper-middle class women are of course vulnerable to street violence, but they can also call upon their position such that violence against them is recognized and decried (Phadke 2007) (the attempts to deny Suzette Jordan's rape case indicate that religion or ethnicity may undermine these advantages). The postcolonial state's vigilance in prompt arrests of the Uber driver accused of rape or the hanging of Jyoti Singh's rapists peg the commission of sexual violence on to the bodies of marginalized men (Roychowdhury 2013).

The now ragingly popular term "intersectionality" goes back to Kimberle´ Crenshaw's work on violence against US women of color (primarily African-American women in her examples). Crenshaw critiqued the feminist tendency to group experiences in "mutually exclusive terrains": "when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (1991, 1242). Demonstrating an alternate approach that would "explor[e] the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political and representational aspects of violence against women of color," Crenshaw offered a heuristic "to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1991, 1244–1245). Critiques of this approach have interrogated its methodological mandates and its capacity to describe situations across times and places (Yuval-Davis 2006, Davis 2008, Nash 2008), but it has nonetheless come to be at the heart of feminist approaches, replacing single-issue or additive models of oppression. Feminist scholars have pointed to its very "ambiguity and open-endedness" as key to its portability (Davis 2008, 76), and praised its flexibility in being able to "analyze the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective construction of identities" (Yuval-Davis 2006, 205). Crenshaw and her co-authors concur, in a recent article that usefully summarizes the trajectory of

the concept, emphasizing that studies of intersectionality ought to focus not on static notions of structural identity but as an analytic "focusing on structures of power that constitute subjects in particular sociopolitical formations," located in "social space and time" (Cho, Crenshaw et al. 2013, 807). Sharmila Rege's conceptualization of Dalit Feminism, for instance, offers an exemplar of political identities constituted through struggles in which gendered marginalization is premised upon the intersection with class, caste, and region (2013).

Other feminist approaches base the force of their politics on refusing the separation of identities in order to claim radical hybridity. Gloria Anzaldua inhabits "*mestiza*" as a category that is purposefully plural and ambiguous, in which "nothing is thrust out, the good and the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she [the *mestiza*] sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (1987, 79). Dramatically overturning Virginia Woolf's contention that as a woman she had no country, the mestiza reminds groups that she is an inherent part of them all: "as a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.)" (Anzaldua 1987, 80). Drucilla Cornell's model for ethical feminism has recently turned to the South African notion of Ubuntu, a term that she glosses as being a quest for intertwined claims and obligations that insist on inclusion and negotiation within communities and lead to co-creating better-realized futures (2014). These two positions take the intersectionality of identity as the basis of politics and praxis, leaning into community rather than severing from it.

Intersectionality, developed as a heuristic to study women's lives, has also been one of the most significant tools for studying men. It provides a way to avoid homogenization of gender, to map diverse constellations of power, privilege and vulnerability, and to understand how discourses of masculinity constitute themselves in particular contexts. R.W. Connell, one of the most influential theorists of this approach, argues for "multiple masculinities" and relational ties between gendered categories in any given context: "To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them. Further, we have to unpack the milieu of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations

operating within them. . . . 'Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (2005, 76). Demetriou's critique of Connell further refines masculinities as being created through continual "hybridity," drawing on other categories of power or marginalization in becoming hegemonic: "hegemonic masculinity is not a purely white or heterosexual configuration of practice but it is a hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure production of patriarchy" (2001, 337). The texts on masculinities cited earlier in this section illustrate this point perfectly, each being an instantiation of gender formation constituted through various discourses and material conditions.

Barely a decade after *Men in Feminism*, Tom Digby's anthology *Men Doing Feminism* (1998) provided compelling evidence of the paradigm shift from theoretical gender binaries to more multifaceted negotiations with identity and power. Several essays in the collection by African-American men described processes of pushing against normative black masculinity by using the histories of "black womanism," including both the intellectual legacies of scholars and activists such as Hortense Spillers and Frederick Douglas, and the experiences of their own female kin with violence or labor. In other essays, transgendered authors used their experiences of transitioning between genders to demonstrate the continuing forms of erasure in framings of identity, and to advocate for feminist theories that would directly address these conflicts. Many essays also mapped what it meant for men to be feminist men, between negative reactions to self-confessed male feminists and cases of men who significantly championed gender equity while not labeling themselves "feminist." Patrick Hopkins' essay "How Feminism made a Man out of Me: The Proper Subject of Feminism and the Problem of Men" typifies the approach of this volume, in claiming feminism for men as much as for women, and rejecting a unitary notion of women's experience as being the basis for feminism (Digby 1998, 48 (33–56)). Across the chapters, this volume reflexively critiques *Men in Feminism* to interrogate singular ideas of gender and standpoint, locating men in politics and practices, across races and genders.

Men's organizing also demonstrates the relationality and intersectional formations of gender. As Mangesh Kulkarni's paper at the "Loyal Interlopers" conference pointed out, men's consciousness raising *as men* has very often been located alongside or in

opposition to women's liberation movements. In contrast to the Digby volume, we might think also about men who are almost the opposite of self-identified feminists, with the example of men's rights movements (MRMs). Many have been generated in the same crucible: US men's groups initially rallied around the notion of harm caused by normative gender roles, and highlighted men's quotidian feelings of disempowerment, but over time many leaders went from being feminist participants to rabid anti-feminists (Messner 1998, Coston and Kimmel 2012–13). Pro-feminist men's groups who worked with notions of power chose to move away from the concept of gender roles altogether (Messner 1998), while men who committed to long-term anti-gendered violence work struggled to find their voices within transnational movements addressing violence, agency, race and power (Messner, Greenberg et al. 2015). These men's groups, pro- or anti-feminist, were shaped as much by socioeconomic changes in labor, property, family structures, community and religious spaces, as by feminist movements or explicit challenges to gender norms.

My own recent research on Indian men's rights activists (some of this research is published in Basu 2015, Basu 2016) similarly reflects the enunciation of masculinities which were apparently born in opposition to governance feminism (the alleged infusion of feminist reforms in State institutions). However, they were shaped within politics of nation and religion, regimes of work, affective discourses of family and fatherhood, employment, property, law and media.[10] The Indian men's movement began with vocal resistance to laws on marriage and domestic violence (more recently to laws of rape and sexual harassment), engaging many people who seek legal help as well as those who become committed leaders spouting misogynous and antifeminist rhetoric. Its rhetoric resonates with similar groups across the globe, while also having a unique focus on legal pluralism and the specificities of Indian politics and kinship. The movement's stances on marriage demonstrate conflicting discourses of tradition, modernity and affect: it generally valorizes the extended/joint family (as indicated in the name of the most prominent umbrella organization, "Save Indian Family Foundation"), but there are subgroups who critique the oppressive logic of companionate marriage and romance, and yet others who claim to be marriage resisters attempting to live life only among men in order to resist compulsory marriage as a normative gender performance.

In making a bid for structural power and privilege, the Indian Men's Rights Movement routinely deploys discourses of gender equity and human rights, calling for de jure (not de facto) equality in alimony and custody, due process rights in criminal charges and for development funds to be directed to needy men. While the movement leaders are often middle-class professionals, they foreground the abjection of men in economic crises (men's unemployment, homelessness and suicides are favorite examples). That is, they proffer an intersectional construction of masculinity to make claims for "men" as a neglected group. Further, they deliberately inhabit gendered vulnerability, whether in the figure of the pudgy father in a Superman costume advocating for fathers' rights as the mascot for International Men's Day, or the President of one of the urban groups who uses the language of harmful gender socialization reminiscent of Messner's (1998) account of sex role analysis: "from childhood, your emotions are killed. When the small boy is crying, he is told, why are you crying like a woman? See, we want to be human, we don't want to be muscular, we want to live first like a human being."[11]

Feminists may well point to these framings of abjection as cynically instrumental appeals to vulnerability that resolutely ignore structural differences in gender. Notable, however, is the way in which the movement uses feminism and ideas of rights to make space within political discourses of entitlement, pointing both to how feminist theories have come to influence identity and entitlement, and to how feminism can be used against itself in the "crisis of [the] gender order" (Connell 2005, 84). Their claims indicate that power may be negotiated by strategically inhabiting recognized vulnerabilities such as rightlessness, and not just by asserting domination. These moves perfectly illustrate Connell's contention that "hegemonic" masculinities are not predetermined sites of privilege but rather, adaptations to changing contours of power: "When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony" (2005, 77; see also Demetriou 2001). Vulnerabilities and powerlessness, often claimed by leaders not destitute or depressed themselves, become an alternate way of shoring up privilege in a bid to re-construct hegemonic masculinity.

Across these examples, gender clearly appears as a prismatic category in which identity is constructed through multiple social

categories. Gender is also the ground on which political and cultural claims are negotiated, with a constant reshaping of feminist or antifeminist identities, or many positions in-between. It bears noting that the point of using intersectionality as a lens is not merely to notice differences, and thereby to place all subjectivities, progressive or reactionary, on even keel. Rather, as Cho et al. (2013) recommend, the significance lies in using intersectionality as an analytic that help us track structures of power. Thus, rather than relegating men to certain pre-given roles *in* feminism, we can analyze how their politics and subjectivities are shaped *through* feminism, and evaluate their contributions to feminist political projects.

## Gatekeeping: Affiliation and Identity

We return in closing to the question of men's loyalty, having done nothing to settle the question of who men are and how they ought to comport themselves within feminism. "In what ways can men ally with feminist initiatives such that the critical edge of feminism is enhanced and not blunted?," the editors have asked (Chowdhury and al 2015, 29). As my survey of feminist/gender scholarship has indicated, let us stipulate that the categories of "men" and "women" are destabilized now as they were not in earlier theories: we presently understand identity itself as layered and fluid, and identity politics (around race, gender, caste or class) as a strategic engagement with (often violent) material and cultural conditions. Men's privileges in upholding "patriarchy," if it can even be regarded as a separable system, are mediated by other components of their social locations.

In trying to evaluate the stakes for assessing "men's" relationship to feminism, I suggest we abandon the *Men in Feminism*-style assessments of loyalty and supplementarity, the obeisance to the so-called woman's standpoint and the mandate for so-called men to be on good behavior, including an a priori relationship between epistemology and identity. We might look instead to the complicated ways in which cisgendered men and women and everyone else locate themselves with respect to their research or activism, as necessarily both insiders and outsiders, and to notice the particularities of these power relations. What are their contributions to feminism? Researchers or activists of all genders may produce work that furthers feminist analyses, as well as work that may critique and challenge its present assumptions.

Feminist methodologies have been crucial in highlighting questions of power in research, and the fundamental relationship between knowledge and power. Standpoint theory, perhaps the most influential of philosophical approaches in this regard, emphasizes the deficits of hegemonic groups and the greater insights of marginalized groups: "Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge" (Harding 1992, 442). Harding argues that feminist perspectives have raised questions about the conditions in which research is produced, but also used "research methodology in service of democratic social transformation" (2005, 2012). Patricia Hill Collins, who famously worked out the rubric of Black Feminism as a movement from individual experiences of marginalization to group consciousness, to informal and formal resistance (later developing it as a tool for understanding transnational conditions), also locates the salience of "standpoint" in its ability to explicate subordinated "group knowledge" (2009 (2000), 29). While she insists that the embodied experiences of African-American women ought to be at the core of knowledge produced by/about them, she eschews the separatism of excluding raced and gendered Others from this project, recommending "points of connection" through which collaborations may be forged if such Others explore the privileges and parallels in their situations (2009 (2000), 41–42).

While it may appear that standpoint theorists are directly at odds with those who would see identity as discursively and strategically constituted, they converge in their focus on power and knowledge. If gender and other social locations are intersectionally constituted, we ought to ask of research that it be attentive to problematizing the production of research, that it emphasize plural and contradictory identities as well as the power relations folded into the research process including political economies, institutional privileges and migrations (Visweswaran 1994, Wolf 1996). This means stepping away from the insider/outsider binary in addition to all the other binaries of gender, race, and caste (Narayan 1993, Basu 1999, 17–20, Naples 2003, Basu 2015, 62–65), characterized by Naples as a false polarization because "these are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members"(2003, 49).

Contrary to the fusion between embodied knowledge and identity critical to Hill Collins' model, we may also want to complicate forms of connection. It is important in this context to interrogate automatic overlaps between biological and social affinities, and to emphasize bonds forged through sustained labor or shared precarity: Brackette Williams reminds us that some "skinfolk" may not necessarily be "kinfolk," while also flagging the value of researchers or activists who may be kinfolk in their depth of connection and commitment to particular communities even if they are not skinfolk (1996). Other scholars trace their mixed cultural and demographic alliances in the research field involving strategic negotiations of identity depending on context (Zavella 1996). Trinh Minh-Ha suggests "speaking nearby" as a model (Chen 1992), that is, speaking to issues without necessarily claiming insider identity, echoed in Sanjay Srivastava's call that men who "do" feminism focus on "undoing their own histories" as illustrated by his own oeuvre on the many registers of Indian masculinity and class. In these models of political alliance, the emphasis is on producing useful work, abjuring acquiescence as the token of inclusion; substantive critique whether by so-called insiders or outsiders helps to forge feminist insights.

Feminist political projects are not undone by destabilizing identity, or by including the scholarly or political interventions of male feminist scholars. Rather, we want to be able to complicate binary gender formation and understand its imbrications within race, caste, class and nation, as well as the dynamics within which men claim or resist feminism. The litmus test of men doing feminist work lies in the seams of gendered power they are able to expose, the nature of alliances they can forge across genders, and their interrogations of privilege and harm including their own footprints. They need neither be blindly loyal nor rudely interloping, but should be unflinchingly vigilant.

## Notes

1 Wesley Morris, "The Year We Obsessed Over identity," *New York Times* October 6 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/magazine/the-year-we-obsessed-over-identity.html?_r=0# Accessed February 24 2016

2 Kai M. Green, "Race and Gender are Not the Same is Not a Good Response to the "Transracial"/Transgender Question OR We Can and Must Do Better" The Feminist Wire June 14, 2015 http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/06/race-and-gender-are-not-the-same-is-not-a-good-response-to-the-transracial-transgender-question-or-we-can-and-must-do-better/

3 Christopher Jaffrelot, "Why Jats want a Quota" *Indian Express* Opinion 23 February 2016 http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/jats-reservation-stir-obc-quota-rohtak-haryana-protests/; Vipul Mudgal, "The Absurdity of Jat Reservation," The Wire 22 February 2016 http://thewire.in/2016/02/22/the-absurdity-of-jat-reservation-22396/ Accessed 18 March 2016
4 The letter primarily circulated through email networks, but a version may be found at "Letter Leaks – Author Ananya Vajpeyi Secretly Tried to Get Dr Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste' introduced by Arundhati Roy Banned" *The Delhi Walla* August 1 2014 http://www.thedelhiwalla.com/2014/08/01/letter-leaks-arundhati-roy-nastily-attacked-by-author-basharat-peers-wife-ananya-vajpeyi/
5 Ananya Vajpeyi, "Ancient Prejudice, Modern Inequality" *The Hindu* Opinion 20 January 2016 http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/dalit-student-rohith-vemula-suicide-ancient-prejudice-modern-inequality/article8124315.ece
6 V. Shoba "Rohith Vemula: A Mind Torn Apart" *Open Magazine* Lead Story 28 January 2016 http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/india/rohith-vemula-a-mind-torn-apart#page1
7 "My Birth is my Fatal Accident: Full Text of Dalit Student Rohith's Suicide Letter" *Indian Express* India 19 January 2016 http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/dalit-student-suicide-full-text-of-suicide-letter-hyderabad/ Note that the headline frames him as "Dalit" with no apparent irony as to the content of the article.
8 Rahul Gandhi contested this hypermasculine claim by evoking size as the norm of masculine power as well: "Modi's '56' Inch Chest Will Shrink to '5.6' Inches: Rahul's Jab to PM" *Hindustan Times* Online "India" 17 July 2015 http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/modi-s-56-inch-chest-will-shrink-to-5-6-inch-rahul-s-jab-at-pm/story-MtjcrAzRmAnJzG0DgCIFtL.html
9 "Concept of Masculinity must be Redefined for Men: Farhan at UN" *Deccan Herald* Online "International" 29 March 2016 http://www.deccanherald.com/content/465050/concept-masculinity-must-redefined-men.html
10 My fieldwork on Indian MRAs, primarily conducted 2013–2014, included semi-structured interviews, group interviews, participant observation at weekly meetings and public events, and discourse analysis of media materials. I attended meetings and interviewed male and female movement leaders and meeting attendees in 8 Indian cities, as well as representatives of feminist organizations dealing with gendered violence, and pro-feminist men's organizations and public intellectuals working on men's issues.
11 Interview, October 2013.

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Chapter 8

# Men in Feminism

## LGBT and feminist entanglements over masculinity

*Ashley Tellis*

Men/the Phallus[1] remain at the centre of Indian feminism and LGBT politics. In what follows, I hope to illustrate this and argue that men (heterosexual, homosexual, trans) need to de-centre men/the Phallus from its privileged and entitled place and that this can be done only through an engagement with critical feminism and critical masculinity studies. I stress that this de-centring cannot be accomplished through a rhetorical sleight of hand as has been the belief of much Third Wave feminism and queer studies, including trans studies. Instead, I contend, a slow, psychoanalytically informed, recognition and displacement of the centrality of men/the Phallus is the task of a critical feminism in dialogue with a critical masculinity studies, neither of which, I hasten to add, exist in the South Asian landscape in the current moment.

### L

On February 17, 2001, Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI) in New Delhi, a formation born from the protests against the right-wing Shiv Sena's attacks on the film *Fire*, that in the moment of its conception comprised at least 29 democratic groups, feminist groups, civil rights groups and NGOs and was by this time reduced to a small organization of four people – two wrote an angry letter to feminists in the Akhil Bharatiya Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Delhi Chapter (henceforth AIDWA) and the National Federation of Indian Women, Delhi Committee (henceforth NFIW), the two feminist organizations of the two main, parliamentary Left factions in India, the CPI and the CPI(M), which was co-signed by several progressive individuals and groups.

The letter registered its protest against the decision of these latter two groups – AIDWA and NFIW – to let lesbians march with

lesbian posters made by CALERI and SANGINI (a lesbian group started by NGO Naz Foundation, India) in the annual International Women's Day march on 8 March. CALERI had already been in a debate for one year with these two groups when they had not been allowed to march the previous year 2000 and had been trying to get them to see the validity of a lesbian presence in the demonstration. This debate was carried through three meetings during the year but clearly had come to nought.

The argument that AIDWA and NFIW had offered was that that year the focus of the march was going to be the industrial closures in Delhi and the destitution of lakhs of working-class families and that lesbianism would dilute the seriousness of this focus. As CALERI records in their letter:

> According to some of us who were present at the 9 February meeting in the AIDWA office, your representatives neither responded to any ideological issues raised by us nor opine [*sic*] on these three meetings held in the recent past to arrive at an understanding on the issue of lesbianism. The onus of the decision not to have these two groups in the 8 March programme was constantly placed on organisation workers and others not present in the room. This clearly communicated your silence and refusal to enter any debate with us on the question of lesbianism in particular and women's sexuality in general. We oppose this oppressive silence in no uncertain terms.[2]

In the letter, CALERI offer a rather weak reason for why they should be included. Clearly, those three meetings do not seem to have helped theorization much on either side. They write:

> The focus on industrial closures in Delhi and the destruction of lakhs of working class families as the theme for March 8 this year is a major concern for all of us and some of us have been working on this since 1996. Therefore, we are unable to understand your objections to getting the broadest possible support for this issue including that of lesbian groups.

To merely mark industrial closures as a concern and then prove allegiance to it by referring to the amount of time one has worked on the issue to merit one's place in the demonstration, on the one hand, and to make, implicitly and explicitly, lesbian bodies and lesbian

groups marked outside the struggles of labour and apart from other groups on the other, appear seriously untheorized moves. CALERI continue: "Such expedient issue-based alliances that sacrifice lesbians in order to attract short-term allies are unacceptable to us."

And further down:

> It is distressing that you refuse to even concede to the presence of two lesbian groups on a day symbolizing the struggle for women's liberation all over the world. This attitude of untouchability indicates that you do not consider the oppression of lesbian women as a crucial dimension of the oppression of all women in a dominantly patriarchal and heterosexist society.

From taking a swipe at AIDWA and NFIW for building short-term alliances with groups which are not specified to conflating lesbianism with feminism in a way that does not show why the separation is problematic, CALERI does not build its case at all.

NFIW and AIDWA both responded to this letter. On February 20, fairly promptly, NFIW wrote a response, expressing some purely decorative distress at CALERI's decision to "opt out of the joint platform of women's organizations for observing International Women's day 2001",[3] a decision, by the way, mentioned nowhere in the CALERI letter. Pushing lesbians out becomes lesbians opting out and this is the first of many ham-fisted rhetorical maneuvers on the part of both NFIW and AIDWA. NFIW's first justification is that lesbianism is just not important enough an issue. They write:

> Surely you would concede to us the right to focus on those issues which, in our assessment, should be urgently taken up by the women's movement. The collective opinion of our organization was, and still is, that the issue of lesbian rights is not such an issue.[3]

Hastening to add that they are pro-lesbian rights and do not support "the denial of normal citizen's rights to lesbians", they then craftily add that: "However, this is a problem which can be placed within the broader ambit of the struggle for civil liberties and democratic rights."

Lesbians are separated from "normal" citizens; from an issue, lesbianism has become a problem; from a women's issue to one of civil liberties and, therefore, outside the ambit of the women's

movement. Three deft moves flow into each other and NFIW march on ahead:

> We feel that in the context of building a mass movement for women's rights there are several more pressing problems which are of the utmost concern to a very large section of Indian women and it is over these problems that we, as an organization, have been mobilizing support over the past several years.

Heterosexual majoritarianism carries the day, then, over "issues . . . likely to be of a contentious nature". Referring to the dialogue over the year, NFIW have this to say:

> In these matters there can be no firm deadlines and it might take much longer for you to convince us and even longer for us to convince our grassroots activists of the necessity of accommodating the demands of lesbian/gay rights groups. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of that kind of patience on your part.[3]

Middle-class heterosexual feminists are difficult to convince about lesbianism; working-class activists even more so. Class becomes the new filter of the lesbian and lesbian tea leaves are just not strong enough. Rambling on about how a longer debate would be needed and defending the organization against the charges CALERI made in terms of administration and position-taking, NFIW end the letter finally admitting that they will not allow the lesbians to march until they drop the term and public identity of lesbian:

> Whatever other concerns these organizations (CALERI, Sangini) might have, their main focus is on the issue of lesbian rights and it is with this single issue that they are most closely identified. In view of the lack of consensus on placing lesbian rights on the joint minimum agenda for this year's International Women's Day, we are not convinced that they should be part of the joint programme.

Finally, as though this neat separation of one's lesbianism from other components of one's life or from other struggles were possible, and as though all of that was reducible to "whatever other

concerns" was not violent enough, they end with some moral beating of the lesbians about the head:

> At a time when the right-wing offensive within the country as well as internationally seeks to intensify the exploitation of women through instruments of class and patriarchal oppression we need to, more than ever, close rather than break ranks. However, should you still not feel inclined to join, we wish you all the best in your struggle and send you warm greetings on the occasion of International Women's Day.

Lesbians are the disrupters, they join the national and international right wing by disrupting the seamless struggle of heterosexual feminists, they corroborate class and patriarchal oppression, but the heterosexuals are still magnanimous, as heterosexuals, of course, always are, in extending them warm greetings. The inability to see how the lesbian critique in India or indeed anywhere might be precisely one of class and patriarchy through sexuality hints at the burden of the long tradition of homophobic, heterosexual ignorance that weighs upon this letter.

AIDWA's response was more indignant and claimed misrepresentation. Beginning by repeating the accusation of lesbians being disunifying, anarchic elements, they refer to consensus-based priorities, lesbianism not being one of them. The clinching argument yet again is in terms of class. They write:

> In the context of the demolition of slums and the closure of industries in Delhi it was agreed that the March 8 focus this year would be on housing and employment rights. In our understanding, as was placed in the meeting, a banner saying "Campaign for Lesbian Rights" will not only cause confusion about the issues we have agreed to highlight but will divert attention from them. You have described this as "sacrificing lesbians." It can equally be interpreted as "sacrificing" the issues of poor women.[4]

Lesbians cause confusion, lesbian issues are a diversion from labour issues and lesbian women sacrifice poor women. Lesbian women are not, or cannot be, therefore, poor women. It is an upper-class disease. AIDWA also ends with inviting these churlish lesbians to the march with great magnanimity and, of course, without their confusion-creating banners.

Before I analyze the repercussions of this set of moves by AIDWA and NFIW, I want to point to another more recent moment in lesbian struggles in India. Jagori, a feminist NGO in Delhi, organized several events, as part of the national-level India chapter of the international '16 days of activism on the question of gender-based violence' event, specifically on the question of violence against women. No event across the country focused on same-sex identified women and violence against them.

Once again, in Delhi, it was only lesbian-identified groups, this time one independent group and one NGO – People for the Rights of Indian Sexual Minorities (PRISM) and Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA) – who protested. In their one-page hand-out entitled 'Right to Life: Denied', after Jagori included them in the protest and recognized their oversight in not doing so, these groups refer to three cases of women lovers in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Kerala, forced to commit suicide because they were not allowed to be with each other, saying:

> Violence against women is not only rape, sexual harassment and bride burning. Violence happens every time a woman is married against her will. It happens every time a woman feels guilty for wanting to be happy and every time that a woman must die because she is unacceptable to society.
>
> Lesbian suicides are a result of society's attempt to restrict women's choices and control their lives.
>
> We protest these deaths as violence against all women.[5]

Once again, as with CALERI, this protest seems damagingly ill-formulated. Different forms of violence are pitted against each other; lesbianism is marked as categorically outside of sexual harassment or rape and lesbian identity formulated only in relation to marriage.

Several questions might, however, be posed to Jagori. Why was violence against women-identified women not a part of this national initiative in a central way? Why does the women's movement generally maintain a silence and a complete lack of intervention with women who are forced to commit suicide because patriarchy will not allow them to live with each other, a phenomenon which has reached the level of a pandemic in India, particularly, more recently, in the state of Kerala? Does Jagori realize that this is a form of violence on women by them as a group, by the feminist movement,

apart from patriarchal structures and, in some senses, therefore, a more insidious violence than the more predictable violences of the heteronormative state, community, and family?

Perhaps the anger at feminist indifference to the lives and deaths of women-identified women lie behind the belligerent response of Forum Against Oppression of Women, a group that contains within it the strong lesbian core of Stree Sangam, in their response to the AIDWA/NFIW letters analyzed earlier. Once again referring to the fact that there was a dialogue on this issue between AIDWA/NFIW, they write:

> Your refusal then can only be read as blatantly discriminatory and an affront to all basic democratic values. And it definitely cannot be anywhere close to the spirit of sisterhood that marks the celebration of International Women's Day. Perhaps, to your highly enlightened minds, lesbians are not women enough. Or there is a peculiar caste system that makes lesbians and organizations working on their rights, untouchable . . .
>
> Then maybe, you have yet to acknowledge that women are sexual beings . . . And thus it becomes impossible for you, as is clear from your actions, to even acknowledge the claims of those who choose an identity based on their sexuality rather than an oppression. Would you be more amenable to considering the claims of those women who have been killed, by their own hands or others, because they wished to choose the life they lived? Or those who are daily beaten, thrown out of homes, forcibly married, or forced into silence about their desires and selves. Would that pain also not have any value in your caste system? . . .
>
> Once again unfortunately we need to remind you, lesbians are women too. Their rights are women's rights. Their rights are human rights. All over the world this has been acknowledged and alliances have been built between groups fighting for lesbian and gay rights and other political groups. As a result of which many countries have changed their old draconian laws. And lesbian and gay groups have worked extensively in other struggles as well. South Africa is too recent and close an example for us to overlook thus [*sic*].
>
> In this light your decision is even more horrific and attacks the very formation of alliance building. We express our deep disgust and horror at your decision. We condemn it as strongly

> as we can and express complete solidarity with those you have thus tried to disinvest of their rights. And we do more. We demand from you an apology and a withdrawal of your earlier decision. We ask of you to act in more accordance with the principles of democracy and feminism.[6]

The deep indignation of this letter occludes the moves within it that are partially strategic and not altogether satisfying. Conjoining caste and sexuality in a powerful alliance it, however, strays into the evocation of human rights and international gay and lesbian movements with no interrogations of these, conflates the oppression and deaths of same-sex identified women with lesbian identity politics (an untenable conflation given that none of these women identify as 'lesbian') and ends with rights-based, democracy-based arguments (again equally questionable categories).

However, the real questions that needed unpacking: (a) that lesbians are not woman enough or perhaps too much woman; (b) that sexuality is not acknowledged as a central aspect of the critique of patriarchy, an aspect intertwined with many other aspects that form women in India; and (c) that alliance politics must be built on a recognition of sexual difference are left untouched.

Questions to AIDWA and NFIW as much as to CALERI and Forum might include: Is there no political economy to same-sex identified women in India? Apart from the facts that most of these women who marry each other and/or commit suicide with each other come from working-class and poor backgrounds, most often in semi-rural or rural India (which makes this pitting of lesbians against poor women factually incorrect more anything else), isn't there a need to theorize the way sexual formation is imbricated with other formations of class, caste, and labour? Isn't the fact of women in Delhi *bastis* and rural Kerala opting out of the reproductive family, for example, a position on the structures of patriarchy, a refusal whose energies can and must be part of any understanding of labour struggles? What is a hierarchizing of poverty or displacement over sexuality based on? On what basis can a distinction be drawn between poverty and the choices one makes about one's own body in relation to compulsory heterosexuality? How is the decision to be with a woman not central to countering patriarchal oppression?

These questions must be put to heterosexual feminism in India. Till then, the heterosexist feminist movement in India will continue

to trample on the mutilated and dead bodies of same-sex identified women in India. At the heart of the debate, and of Indian feminism, I contend, is the overriding and uncritical desire for men. Men remain at the centre of the women's movement in India and they are unable to tolerate a severance with that. There is a deep lesbophobia at the heart of the women's movement in India.

What men – straight, gay, trans – might do is to create more spaces within the LGBT movement for lesbian women to participate and articulate their concerns. The LGBT movement is largely gay male and lesbian voices in it remain tokenist and behalfist, if not entirely absent.

## G

On the other hand, the women's movement, at least younger generations of it, has been quite happy to engage with and support gay men. Gay men in response have spat in the face of the women's movement for their pains. In the protracted struggle for the reading down of Section 377, now known as the Naz Foundation case, the 'queer movement', run by a bunch of slick male lawyers, was supported throughout by various independent and funded women's groups. Soon after the pyrrhic triumph of the Naz judgement, the question of gender neutrality in rape law came up and representatives of the 'queer movement', with no sensitivity to the women's movement's long history of rape law amendments or cultures of rape in India, supported the idea of gender neutrality.

In an ahistorical, arrogant and behalfist article, Aarti Mundkur and Arvind Narrain, shooting from the shoulders of silenced hijras, argued against the focus on women as the only victims in rape law. While retaining the focus on the idea of man as only victimizer/accused, they called for a broadening of the rape law into gender neutrality as "the acts contemplated under the new definition of rape in the law could well be perpetrated by a man on the body of any person" (Mundkur and Narrain 2013). They contend that "the gender of the victim should have been irrelevant in the eyes of the law and protection should have been extended to all persons."

Apart from the fact that this ignores the historical struggles of women in the Indian women's movement against rape for decades now and their demand that the law remain gender-specific for several reasons which, at the very least, demand engagement, there is no reason offered why men should not be included as victims of sexual

violence – gay men are frequently victims of sexual violence and rape – and why the self-righteous focus on hijras is the only point.

Indeed, Mundkur and Narrain pit hijras against women victims of rape in a thoughtless and needlessly confrontational manner. They write:

> The resistance to broaden the category of victim to that of any person stems from a viewpoint that the word "person" would dilute the identity of women as traditional victims of sexual violence. Recognising the heroic struggle [*sic*] of Mathura and Bhanwari Devi against sexual violence, ought not to mean that we disregard the struggle of persons such as Kokila.

What follows, predictably, is a graphic description of the rape and further sexual violation of Kokila, a hijra, at the hands of goondas and then the police. As if this voyeuristic and exploitative manoeuvring is not enough, Mundkur and Narrain go on to argue that "retaining only women as victims . . . reinforces the patriarchal logic that rape is intrinsically bound to notions of shame and honour". While such an argument is baseless and untenable in and of itself, it also sidesteps the point that sexual violence against men is even more steeply entrenched in notions of shame and honour which is why Kashmiri men rarely speak of the sexual violence they face routinely at the hands of the Indian army and paramilitary forces,[7] or men and boys routinely raped across India do not report such cases and resort to extreme forms of retributive violence as justice to avenge it.

The 'queer' (read gay men, especially slick, upper-caste, upper-class lawyers) and feminist activists who insist that the law be gender-neutral even as they also insist that the victimiser remain constant as a man ignore the perpetration of violence, sexual and other kinds, on women by women, on men by women, and on men and hijras by the hijras they unilaterally paint as victims.[8] They only show their own hypocrisy and unwillingness to recognize violence on excluded communities they do not wish to see (Kashmiris) and violence on others by communities (hijras) that they routinely use and abuse as totalized and passive victims.

This amounts to a lack of interrogation of the privileges and entitlements of men, and shows that at the heart of the 'queer movement' is a shoring up of these. The ruse of neutrality is not taken to its logical culmination at all.

Gay men have to realize their privilege and learn to give it up. They also have to learn what a real engagement with feminism means. Gay men – no men – are equally oppressed as women. Oppressed, yes, and in different ways, sure, but simply not structurally, systemically, and to the extent that women – all women – are. Only when gay men realize this might a real engagement with feminism begin.

## B

Bisexuals remain a neglected voice within the LGBT movement. Neither does the women's movement engage with them nor the LGBT movement and not even the 'queer movement'. This has led to the pandemic of gay men marrying women, making their lives difficult, often ruining them (as with the case of the suicide of the wife of the AIIMS doctor). Bisexual women do not have any space at all and are barely talked about. They remain in marriages that do not have dramatic outcomes like the ones of gay men often do.

The women's movement's lesbophobia extends to biphobia. There is not one single documented discussion of the bisexuality of women in the early decades of the women's movement. There is some discussion of it in groups like Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA, earlier Stree Sangam), especially in the many issues of their recently (and unfortunately) dead journal *Scripts* but these have not been taken up by the women's movement at large. Other funded NGOs that claim allegiance with feminism like CREA and TARSHI do speak about bisexuality, as do recent 'queer' volumes of fiction and poetry, but there is no substantial engagement with feminism.

Bisexual men do not appear to engage with feminism at all even as feminism might offer them the tools with which to carve out a space for bisexuals which might lead to fewer lives being damaged and destroyed. It appears that men remain at the centre for bisexual men and women and that the privilege and entitlement of men and practices like monogamy and institutions like marriage remain hegemonic.

Bisexual men are best positioned to engage with feminism and produce space for themselves but also for the women's movement. Bisexual men might save themselves and bisexual women by opening up a space for non-monogamous, non-marital existence through an engagement with critical feminism and critical masculinity studies.

## T

There is no real transgender movement in India, let alone one that engages with feminism. Transgender is the umbrella term used for various identities in the United States and, as with the rest of the 'queer movement', the trend is to follow those hegemonic categorizations here. Transgenders in India, at the moment, comprise two main groups: the first is hijras (who go under different names in different regions in India, though, I contend, that hijras are not transgender and must be seen as a separate category), a more articulate subset of whom have written autobiographies and who organize around hijra politics in cities and some rural areas, mainly in the South and by no means comprise a national group formation, and second is a small, elite, upper-class, and upper-caste set of articulate, English-speaking activists also located mainly in the South. Neither set particularly engages with feminism and, I argue, both sets leave the centrality of men/the Phallus intact.[9]

Transgender politics in parts of the West – the United States and England to be precise – have developed a sharp and antagonistic relationship with feminism, especially an earlier set of second wave feminists, represented by figures like Germaine Greer. Feminist critic Jacqueline Rose has judiciously, and somewhat generously, recently summarized these debates across several decades. No such antagonistic debate exists here but the Indian women's movement has simply ignored women-identified men like hijras and the other set have not built any conscious engagement with feminism.

Younger feminists, many located in NGOs, have engaged with both sets, somewhat uncritically and problematically but not in terms of any engagement with feminism. More importantly, for the purposes of this essay, nobody in this movement has offered an engagement with masculinity, let alone a three-way dialogue between masculinity, feminism, and transgender politics.

Rose (speaking of the West) contends that the transgender men or male-to-female transgenders and/or transsexuals (MTFs) who have been the bone of contention for Western feminists who refuse to acknowledge them as women and see them as a new kind of patriarchal oppressor actually invading the space of women are often enacting a refusal of masculinity in their embrace of femininity. This is a contentious claim both in the West and in India.

The need for most MTFs to transition into deeply entrenched femininity or in the case of hijras to take on the aspect of women,

whether through transvestism and/or the assumed identity of women, are identifications with femininity that refuse masculinity only inasmuch as is structured by a firm belief in the binary of masculinity/femininity.[10] They are not a refusal of masculinity. They are impelled by the desire for masculinity.

Femininity is required to be acceptable to men and to be desired by men, as only women in this symbolic universe can be legitimately desired by men. In India at any rate, the transition does not do away with the reverence for masculinity; there is no feminist critique of the centrality and symbolic power of masculinity. With FTMs as well, the centrality of masculinity is not dislocated, only assumed. Most of the young activists are female-to-male (FTM) transgenders, transsexualsor genderqueers and assume male names, male personae, and highly male modes of doing politics. The cultural work they produce is also steeped in cultures of highly traditional masculinity.

### *Coda: re-thinking feminism, masculinity, and LGBT relations*

What I have been trying to argue through this essay is that Indian feminism and LGBT politics both leave masculinity somewhat unquestioned and safely ensconced in its privileged centrality. What we need is a three-way dialogue between critical feminism/women's studies, critical masculinity/men's studies, and critical LGBT politics/LGBT studies, none of which have much space in the current conjuncture in India, that will open up and de-centre the privileged centrality of men/the Phallus. There is, of course, much rhetoric, especially from the 'queer movement', that claims that this has already been done and that we are already living in a space of excesses, transgressions, and radicalities, if not revolutions. This, I contend, is a rhetorical scam.

The kind of opening up of a space I speak of can only be slow and laborious work and requires the patience and the sagacity of a psychoanalytic perspective that knows its own smoking up of mirrors. Jacqueline Rose offers us the lineaments of this possible space in her recent essay on trans politics. I want to build my account of that possible space through an engagement with her psychoanalytically informed feminist insights that, I contend, might form the lineaments of it.

Jacqueline Rose speaks of the dangers of trans identity politics – to need to avoid the identitarian compulsion because:

> It obliges the trans person, whatever the complexity of their experience, to hold fast to the rails of identity. It turns the demand to take control of one's own life, which is and has to be politically non-negotiable, into a vision of the mind as subordinate to the will (the opposite of what the psychic life can ever be). And it leaves no room for sexuality as the disruptive, excessive reality and experience it mostly is.
>
> (Rose 2016)

Sexuality is disruptive, this much we know from Freud. But its excess is not one that we can easily celebrate. It is an excess that often forces us into positions we can't get out of, brings out *ressentiment*, sends us scuttling into corners we do not want to creep out of. Rose warns us: "But, as with all political movements, and especially any grounded in identity politics, there is always a danger that suffering will become competitive, a prize possession and goal in itself."

Even more importantly, not just for trans but for all of us, she writes: "trans can never be – without travestying itself and the world – its own sole reference point" (Rose 2016). It is only when we realize this that a dialogue might begin, that men/the Phallus will be pulled back from transcendental magnificence into vulnerable history.

Rose questions the category 'cis' that transpeople use so blithely to mark everyone in the world but themselves:

> Given a primary, universal bisexuality, sex, Freud said, is an act involving at least four people. The cis – i.e. non trans – woman or man is a decoy, the outcome of multiple repressions whose unlived stories surface nightly in our dreams. From the Latin root meaning 'on this side' as opposed to 'across from', 'cis' is generally conflated with normativity, implying 'comfortable in your own skin', as if that were the beginning and end of the matter.

The dialogue that I am talking about can only happen when we drop the assuredness about ourselves. Reading trans narratives and the obsetreperous self-assuredness they display, Rose remarks:

> I often get the sense of a psychic beat missed of there being parts of the story which do, and don't, want to be told, moments that

reach the surface, only to be forgotten or brushed aside in the forward march of narrative time. As though the personal could also be a front for the personal, covering over what it ostensibly, even generously displays.

The dismantling of masculinity can slowly begin its dialogue with feminist and LGBT politics only when we start retrieving those psychic beats.

## Notes

1 I use phallus in the psychoanalytic sense where it "underlines the symbolic function taken on by the penis in the intra and inter subjective dialectic" as Laplanche and Pontalis put it. For Lacan, it is 'the signifier of desire'. The Oedipus complex, in Lacan's reformulation of it, consists in a dialectic whose major alternatives are to be or not to be the phallus, and to have it or not to have it; the three moments of this dialectic are centred on the respective positions occupied by the phallus in the desires of the three protagonists. See Jean Laplance and Jean Bertrand Pontalis (1973: 312–14).
2 Letter from CALERI and others dated 17 February 2001.
3 Letter by NFIW dated 20 February 2001 and signed by Sehba Farooqui.
4 Letter to CALERI from AIDWA undated and signed by Kirti Singh, Rajni Palriwala, Shanti Devi, and Nirmal, Delhi Committee office bearers.
5 'Right to Life: Denied' Statement issued by CREA and PRISM.
6 Letter to AIDWA and NFIW from Forum Against Oppression of Women, Mumbai, dated 4 March 2001.
7 Kashmiri feminist and Hurriyat activist Anjum Zamarud Habib (she runs the women's wing of the Hurriyat called the Khawateen-e-Markaz) offered a critique of the Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression's's focus only on women by pointing out that most victims of sexual violence in Kashmir are not women but men. See my http://www.sify.com/news/your-sex-is-a-terrible-wound-news-columns-pbjnJTjbhiebe.html
8 For example, see my https://www.dailyo.in/voices/jyoti-singh-december-16-gangrape-byculla-prison-rape-sexual-violence/story/1/18260.html
9 These groups have not come together, barring a recent publication of *A Life in Trans Activism* (Revathi and Murali 2016), where hijra activist A. Revathi collects the narratives of both hijras and trans men and speaks of them as one community. An analysis of the problematic nature of this move is beyond the scope of this essay. For some indications, see my http://www.gaylaxymag.com/blogs/bad-hijras-vs-good-trans-delusional-trans-utopia/
10 Hijras identify as women and though in certain parts (like the state of Tamil Nadu) they have gained rights as a third gender and are named as such, they remain in the construction of their desire firmly within

the binary of masculinity/femininity. Slavoj Žižek has recently critiqued the chimera of the proliferation of gender identities under the umbrella transgender by showing how they all are still part of the basic masculinity/femininity binary (Žižek 2016). See my http://www.gaylaxymag.com/blogs/tough-work-sexuality/

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Chapter 9

# Pursuing masculinity studies in a pro-feminist perspective

*Mangesh Kulkarni*

In the introduction to her celebrated feminist work, *The Second Sex* (originally published in 1949), Simone de Beauvoir made a startling remark which seemed out of sync with the existentialist provenance of her thought: "A man would *never* set out to write a book on the peculiar condition of the human male" (Beauvoir 1972; emphasis added). Contrast this with Ruth Vanita's recent observation:

> Over the last decade, Women's Studies departments worldwide have been changing their names to incorporate words like 'gender' and 'sexuality'. This is in part a response to the recognition that if, as de Beauvoir famously put it, one is not born but becomes a woman then *men too are not born but made*.
>
> (Vanita 2014: 1; emphasis added)

How did this change come about? What made it necessary to question the social construction of masculinity and what has been the impact of such interrogation? These are some of the questions I address in the present paper which offers a meandering account reflecting on the origin, travails, and joys of a continuing journey that has traversed a variety of academic and activist domains in pursuit of that obscure object of intellectual desire: masculinity. I wish to reveal some of the intents animating the journey, as also the doubts, dilemmas, and discoveries encountered on the way.

## Purblind man's bluff

My academic training in political science at the (then) University of Bombay during the first half of the 1980s had given me little exposure to feminism.[1] Yet I had managed to acquire a nodding

acquaintance with it through autodidactic pursuits. I was sensitized to the existential, political, and cognitive challenges posed by feminist thought and praxis[2] after joining SNDT Women's University (South Mumbai campus) as a faculty member in 1989.[3] Its Research Centre for Women's Studies (the first such centre in the country, started by the sociologist Neera Desai in 1974 and subsequently nurtured by Maithreyi Krishnaraj), though located in a faraway suburban campus, radiated a certain energy, and I had an opportunity to interact with the scholars and activists who were associated with it. Besides, Sujata Patel – author of a widely acclaimed article critiquing Gandhi from a feminist standpoint (Patel 1988) – joined the neighbouring Department of Sociology in early 1992.

Symposia held at the South Mumbai campus frequently focused on gender issues such as the Maharashtra government's policy for women (1994) – the first of its kind in the country – and Dipankar Gupta's polemical piece on the 'feminification of theory', which had appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (Gupta 1995). Distinguished scholars like Veena Das, Vandana Shiva, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Geraldine Forbes, who represented various strands of feminism, delivered lectures at the University. The campus also witnessed several events that subjected the excesses of patriarchal masculinity to a glaring scrutiny. I particularly recall discussions on two horrific episodes of the early 1990s: communal riots in Surat where rape was used as an instrument of retaliation, and the Jalgaon scandal involving a protracted, brutal sexual exploitation of young women. Such events highlighted men's predatory proclivities, and left me with a lingering sense of deep despondency, even as they impelled me to investigate the manifold construction of masculinity and to look for ways of reconstructing it.

It was at this juncture that I stumbled into the field of masculinity studies through a chance reading of texts by two American authors: an entry in the *International Encyclopaedia of Ethics* (Muesse 1995: 546–7) and a book entitled *The Masculine Mystique: The Politics of Masculinity* (Kimbrell 1995) – the former was available in the University of Bombay library and the latter in the American Center library. The encyclopaedia entry by Mark William Muesse (who taught religious studies at Rhodes College) outlined key strands of 'the men's movement' which represented divergent responses to the felt inequities of the prevailing gender order. These included the following: pro-feminist, men's rights-oriented, spiritual revisionist, socialist, African American, and gay.

In *The Masculine Mystique*, Andrew Kimbrell (a lawyer and environmentalist) eloquently explained the moral economy of men's degeneration in the industrial era. He passionately pleaded for the retrieval of a wholesome masculinity by adopting a framework that was not confined to feminism. Around the same time I became aware of the recently formed men's groups in India[4] and discovered the existence of a small but significant scholarly corpus on Indian masculinities.[5] Together, they seemed to open up new avenues for research and action.

The ensuing exhilaration led me to publish a rudimentary article on 'Rethinking Masculinity after Feminism' (Kulkarni 1997). I began by paying tribute to the feminist heritage; pointed out that men like J. S. Mill, Friedrich Engels, Jotiba Phule, and M. K. Gandhi had made a significant contribution to the cause of women's empowerment; briefly discussed prominent currents in the mobilization of men projecting various perceptions of masculinity; flagged the emergence of 'men's studies'; sounded a note of caution concerning 'misandry'; and finally offered a programme – under the glib rubric of 'masculinism' – for the emancipatory reconstruction of masculinity: salvaging and strengthening of fatherhood, male bonding, and mentoring, encouraging men to take proper care of their psycho-physical and spiritual health, and securing their involvement in projects pertaining to social justice as well as environmental conservation. The programme was largely inspired by *The Masculine Mystique*, which I acknowledged in the article.

It took me some time to realize that Kimbrell's position had a close affinity with and shared the limitations of the mythopoetic (aka spiritual revisionist) men's movement in the United States – a deeply problematic endeavour to recuperate a pre-modern culture of heroic masculinity, inspired by the writings of authors like Robert Bly (1990). But feminist friends were not tardy in subjecting my article to a stringent critique. The activist scholar Rohini Hensman said that 'masculinism' could not be equated with feminism and in fact amounted to a manifestation of backlash, that pursuing 'men's studies' would be as politically fraught as pursuing 'White studies';[6] besides, practices like 'male bonding' were implicitly misogynous and hence more a part of the problem than a viable solution to the ills of patriarchy. Further, Sonal Shukla, founder of the Women's Resource Ventre Vacha (Mumbai), told me that no man could claim to be a feminist in good faith; only women could truly inherit the legacy of feminism due to their direct experience of patriarchal oppression.

These critical responses gave me pause and eventually led me to discard some of my naïve formulations (e.g. the positing of 'masculinism' along the lines of 'feminism') and to modify others (e.g. the replacement of 'feminist' by 'pro-feminist' to describe my position);[7] but they also confirmed my reservations about the feminist proclivity to misandry or the belief that masculinity itself was responsible for most of the world's woes.[8] I later expressed the resulting unease in a short write-up that appeared in the newsletter of SNDT University's Research Centre for Women's Studies (Kulkarni 2001a). Meanwhile, I continued seeking avenues for the exploration of masculinity by creating an email group to share ideas on the subject, by establishing a good rapport with Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) – a Mumbai-based pro-feminist platform launched in 1993 – and by editing a special number of the journal *New Quest*, which included articles focusing on feminist analyses of literature, science, sexuality, and masculinity (Kulkarni 1998).

## The proper study of mankind

The new millennium brought a series of unforeseen opportunities to widen and deepen my involvement in the study of masculinities. A committee headed by the senior historian Mani Kamerkar awarded me the Indal Fellowship of the Asiatic Society of Bombay (then approaching its bicentenary) to do research on the subject. This was an auspicious omen as it signalled the opening up of a hoary learned society to an emerging area of interdisciplinary inquiry. Rajib Sarkar, editor of *Gentleman* – a popular men's magazine established in 1979 – consulted me in planning and had me contribute to an issue with a special section on 'Understanding Indian Masculinity' (Sarkar 2001: 28–67), which was perhaps the first of its kind in the country.[9] The highlights of the issue included Sudhir Kakar's explication of the maternal feminine in Indian psychoanalysis, Vijay Nagaswami's essay on male empowerment, and Ashley Tellis's autobiographical musings on being a lesbian trapped in a male body. I was invited to join the editorial team of *Men and Masculinities* (Sage Publications) – the leading international journal in the field, which was started in 1998 and edited by the American sociologist Michael Kimmel, a pioneer of critical masculinity studies. My active association with the journal has continued over the last one and a half decades.

I participated in a workshop on the construction of male identity and sexuality, organized by Tathapi (Pune) – a non-governmental

organization founded by the veteran activist and doctor Mira Sadgopal – and was requested to write a report of the proceedings (Kulkarni 2001b). This workshop brought together health practitioners, media persons, and NGO personnel. The second such exercise conducted by Tathapi, the workshop marked a broadening of the organization's focus on women and health. The deliberations enabled me to acquire a clearer awareness of how masculinity was emerging as an important area of intervention in the civil society sector, cutting across diverse concerns ranging from HIV/AIDS to education. The workshop gave me an opportunity to interact with like-minded persons from diverse fields, such as the film-maker Rahul Roy, best-known for his documentary, *When Four Friends Meet* (2000), which deftly tracks the making of masculinity through a dialogue with young working-class men in Delhi. I was pleasantly surprised to know that he was about to launch a Travelling Seminar on Exploring Masculinities.

The Travelling Seminar (2001–2002) – sponsored by the United Nations Development Fund for Women – was an altogether novel and fruitful experiment aimed at expanding the boundaries of and generating synergy between gender studies and activism through a series of events featuring films, research papers, and personal narratives on diverse aspects of masculinity. Framed within a broad gender and development perspective, it drew on the expertise of scholars across disciplines as well as practitioners from different walks of life, and elicited the participation of a large number of students and teachers in half a dozen (mostly non-metropolitan) universities around the country. Roy organized a scaled-up South Asian sequel during 2005–2007, and I facilitated the event held in Pune. The twin Travelling Seminar series brought into focus and gave a fillip to critical masculinity studies (a nomenclature I was persuaded to substitute for 'men's studies')[10] in the Indian subcontinent. Regrettably, efforts to put together and publish the proceedings came to naught.

It is interesting to note that two books on men in contemporary India were penned by freelance women writers: *Surviving Men* by the journalist and novelist Shobha De (1998), and *The Indian Man: His True Colours* by Sandhya Mulchandani (1999) – a geologist by training, who subsequently translated and commented upon Sanskrit erotic literature. While De's light-hearted and racy treatment of the subject runs true to type, Mulchandani offers a sober and informative account. The next decade saw the growing salience

of issues related to masculinity in the mass media and the public imagination more generally. The most visible of these was the supposed rise of a metrosexual subculture. I caught glimpses of it at a unique 10-day Met-Fest hosted by the young arts curator Himanshu Verma – himself an incarnation of the metrosexual persona – and held in Mumbai during October 2005. Pro-feminist initiatives, gay self-assertion, and the clamour of groups championing men's rights were also becoming conspicuous in the urban milieu. This was the scenario I tried to capture and contextualize in an essay (Kulkarni 2007) that appeared in a handy volume comprising English translations of select articles drawn from the back numbers of *Purush Spandana* (*Men's Heartbeats*) – a Marathi journal (perhaps the first of its kind in South Asia) devoted to men's self-reflexive writings, which had been jointly published by MAVA and its sister organization Purush Uvacha (Pune) during Diwali every year since 1996.

By this time I was convinced that systematic research examining different manifestations of masculinity in India, though sporadic and of recent origin, had already enriched our understanding of the country's past and present in significant ways. Accordingly, I took up a research project (supported by the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Pune which I had joined in 2005) focused on a review of the relevant literature. The report (subsequently included in Kulkarni 2014) provided an illustrative, thematic account of certain major insights garnered from the review and suggested directions for future research. Here I wish to flag a few examples to prove the point that debates on masculinities have contributed to and inflected larger debates concerning colonialism and nationalism. The political psychologist Ashis Nandy advanced an influential argument concerning the rise of martial masculinity (Nandy 1983) under the impact of colonial rule, which has generated a lively discussion involving historians like Rosalind O'Hanlon and Mrinalini Sinha. O'Hanlon (1997) has demonstrated the centrality of martial masculinity to society and politics in the late Mughal era, while Sinha (1997) has contended that notions of 'British manliness' and 'Indian effeminacy' were conjointly constructed within the imperial social formation. The political scientist Partha Chatterjee (1986) persuasively argued that the Indian nationalists recognized the dominance of the West in the material/outer sphere, even as they defended the sanctity of the inner/spiritual domain. This dichotomy was interrogated by the anthropologist Joseph Alter (1994) who suggested that the male body, which was at once

a material object and a spiritual trope, had become a focal site for nationalism in contemporary India.

## The way forward

At this juncture it is necessary to consider certain serious theoretical and political questions about the study of men and masculinities, which have been raised by Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2006: 22–44) in his unpublished doctoral dissertation.[11] He argues that the fledgling academic enterprise is deeply flawed on various counts. Barring a few exceptions (e.g. Sinha 1997), writings associated with it are marred by essentialism (e.g. Nandy 1983); the dominant current within it comprises ethnographic research which conflates 'masculinity' with 'men' (e.g. Osella and Osella 2003: 729–54); while some historical work it features is predicated on an unexamined link between 'masculine' and 'public' (e.g. Gupta 2001). Radhakrishnan alleges that much of the 'pro-feminist' preoccupation with Indian masculinities is politically suspect as it is anchored in a superficially progressive and gender-inclusive, but actually heterosexist and reificatory (for it assumes a pre-discursive maleness) perspective propagated by American writers like Harry Brod (1998); besides it is suffused with the de-politicized developmentalist vocabulary of international donor agencies and primarily targets subaltern men, often treating them as objects of 'the anthropological gaze' (e.g. Anandhi et al. 2002).

Radhakrishnan's own preferred approach is derived from the work of canonical queer theorists (the good Americans!) like Judith Butler (1993), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995), and Judith Halberstam (1998) whose work suggests that notions of masculinity involve "attributes not only of men but also of women or even inanimate objects, characteristics and feelings" (Radhakrishnan 2006: 36). Consequently, he tracks the structuring of the public domain in Kerala – the focus of his dissertation – by positing "masculinity as an empty signifier, which during the course of the analysis of the material, is filled with content" (Radhakrishnan 2006: 3). He draws on the historical writings of Partha Chatterjee (1989) and Mrinalini Sinha (1997), which facilitate an understanding of the "ways in which notions of masculinity (and indeed, femininity) were important nodes for the organization of power in the colonial context" through a critical examination of the link between masculinity and "publicness" (Radhakrishnan 2006: 27–8). Many of

Radhakrishnan's points are well taken; but it is necessary to guard against the likely pitfalls of the radical constructivist notion of social existence on which he rests his case.[12]

While methodological debates will continue, the critical study of Indian masculinities should develop in dialogue with the finest work done in the field. It is necessary to build on O'Hanlon's inquiry into the pre-colonial contexts of Indian masculinities, and on Sinha's interpretation of their transformation under the impact of colonialism and modernity. There are a handful of scholarly writings which address the ancient era. These include studies focusing on the construction of masculinity in Vedic (Whitaker 2011) and Buddhist (Powers 2009) cultures. A number of notable works address the colonial and post-colonial periods: Indira Chowdhury's incisive analysis of *bhadralok* masculinity (Chowdhury 2001), Chandrima Chakraborty's insightful charting of the ways in which Hindu asceticism and manliness were braided in nationalist discourse (Chakraborty 2011), G. Arunima's path-breaking study of the historical reasons for the legal abolition of matriliny in 20th-century Kerala (Arunima 2003), and Sanjay Srivastava's fine-grained account of the Doon School (Uttarakhand) – a high-profile residential academy for boys – as a site for the making of a modern masculine identity (Srivastava 1998).

Alter (2011) alerts us to the plurality of discourses and specificity of sites that constitute male bodies and insert them into larger configurations like nationalism and communalism. The changing plebeian perceptions of virility and patriotism as also practices of physical culture and masculine camaraderie would be worthy of examination from this standpoint. Particular attention needs to be paid to their key role in the mass mobilization programme of militant Hindu nationalist formations such as the Bajrang Dal and the Shiv Sena. The exploration of body politics needs to be complemented by an accent on the body politic. Together they require a focus on the fashioning of subjectivities via processes of representation, political economy, and technologies of the self, especially as they resonate with the dynamics of post-Fordist capitalism. Such themes are ably addressed by Milind Wakankar (1995: 45–73), Thomas Blom Hansen (1996: 137–72), Sikata Banerjee (2000, 2005), and Chandrima Chakraborty (2006) in the Indian context, while Amrit Wilson (2007) adroitly analyzes them in a diasporic setting.

The manifold mobilization of men around gender issues demands urgent investigation. The efforts of pro-feminist groups in

eliminating gender-based violence as also in the larger area of gender sensitization should be studied, refined, and replicated (Wagle 2007; Das and Singh 2014: 69–79). It is necessary to build bridges between them and the women's movement[13] through activist initiatives like the Forum to Engage Men – a national network of organizations working with men and boys for gender justice – which was formed in 2007;[14] and the Purush Samvad Kendra (Forum for Dialogue with Men), launched by the Nari Samata Manch (a Pune-based autonomous women's organization founded in 1982) circa 2008.[15] A graphic book on men, produced by Rahul Roy, Anupama Chatterjee, and Sherna Dastur (2007), and Kamla Bhasin's primer on masculinity in the Gender Basics series of Women Unlimited (Bhasin 2005) are two heart-warming bibliographic examples of such synergy.

The interventions of gay men's groups have opened up the area of subaltern sexual subcultures and of sexuality more generally. They have highlighted the plight of men who have sex with men and of male sex workers in particular. Apart from providing a distinctive perspective on the predicament stemming from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, they have questioned the very premises of heteropatriarchy and stimulated thinking and action aimed at the creation of a healthy, plural order of gender and sexual relations. Many of their concerns have found an echo in an impressive body of literature on alternative sexualities in India. Ravi Verma, Pertti Pelto, Stephen Schensul and Archana Joshi (2004), Sherry Joseph (2005), Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (2005), Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (2007), Nivedita Menon (2007), and Sanjay Srivastava (2013) have brought out noteworthy volumes dealing with various aspects of the theme.

The men's rights groups represent a complex phenomenon. Their rise – triggered by the alleged unfairness and abuse of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, which was introduced in 1983 to combat the menace of dowry deaths by punishing the cruel treatment of women at the hands of their husbands or in-laws (Ratanlal and Dhirajlal 1992: 569) – is symptomatic of the social malaise caused by attempts to alter patriarchal gender relations through an excessive reliance on the blunt weapon of the law (Abeyratne and Jain 2013). To feminists, they epitomize backlash of a virulent sort (Tata Institute of Social Sciences 1999). However, their grievances have often evoked a sympathetic response from the judiciary. Thus the High Court in Hyderabad has issued guidelines directing the state

police not to arrest the accused in cases filed under Section 498A without securing the permission of the district superintendent of police or an officer of equivalent rank in metropolitan cities (*The Times of India* 2014). The men's rights groups had for long received scant scholarly scrutiny – a lacuna that has been partially filled by the recently published work of Romit Chowdhury (2014) and Srimati Basu (2015).

An adequate mapping of Indian masculinities would involve critical engagement with academic as well as activist desiderata of the sort delineated previously in this chapter. This is a tall order. But there is no avoiding it if one is to pursue critical masculinity studies with the intellectual rigour and contemporary relevance it demands and deserves. In this context, it is heartening to note two sets of positive developments. The first of these encompasses the MenEngage Global Symposium[16] held in New Delhi during 10–13 November 2014, and the regional seminars[17] that were held in different parts of the country as a prelude to it. A volume of select papers presented at the Symposium is slated for publication in the near future (Kulkarni forthcoming). Second, issues related to men and masculinities are being slowly but surely incorporated in the academic agenda of scholars, journals, and institutions concerned with the human sciences. Most significantly, they have emerged as explicit foci of doctoral research (Radhakrishnan 2006; Jadhav 2011; Vijayan 2012; Pakhare 2014). Their integration into the curricula of various disciplines should be particularly helpful. I have made a small move in this direction by incorporating a course on the 'politics of masculinities' in the master's of arts (political science) curriculum of Savitribai Phule Pune University. It highlights the ways in which politics – understood as a process that constitutes and contests human subjectivities as also social structures – shapes and is shaped by masculinities, thereby staging a productive dialogue between gender studies and political studies.[18]

## Coda

While pondering over the prospects of critical masculinity studies, I chanced upon an enigmatic *doha* (verse) composed by the medieval Indian saint-poet Kabir (Mehrotra 2011: 137), where he says:

> I won't come
> I won't go

I won't live
I won't die
( . . . )
I'm bowl
And I'm platter
I'm man
And I'm woman
( . . . )
I'm nothing
Says Kabir
I'm not among the living
Or the dead

Such a 'blissed-out'[19] state might be a consummation devoutly to be wished, but lesser mortals must wrestle with the manifold contradictions of gender identities constituted in the matrix of nature and culture. We need to find appropriate ways of understanding and transforming men and masculinities in the twilight zone between existing patriarchal orders and a variety of emancipatory alternatives shimmering on the horizon of Utopia. This necessitates the search for an adequate theoretical framework together with a mode of conducting a "concrete analysis of the concrete situation", which is "the culmination of all general theory, its consummation, the point where it therefore breaks into practice" (Lucaks 1971: 43).

## Notes

1 This was of a piece with the generally dated and parochial character of the graduate curriculum. For a critical overview of the teaching of political science in the metropolis during this period, see Kulkarni (1988). Many of the curricular reforms I had suggested in this article were introduced subsequently thanks to the initiative taken by Nawaz Mody, who became the head of the Department of Civics and Politics (University of Bombay) in 1994.
2 Bombay had witnessed pioneering feminist initiatives such as the Forum Against Oppression of Women and the Women's Centre circa 1980, but they were yet to acquire prominence and I was unaware of their existence during my student days. It may be noted that most of the women and men who launched and sustained these initiatives had been engaged in theoretical and activist endeavours inspired by Marxism.
3 This is not to suggest that the University was a hotbed of feminism. A critical gender perspective was not integrated into all the courses taught at the university. This was true of the master's programme in political science until I enlisted the support of the head of my

department, Usha Thakkar, and helped introduce feminist concerns in the curriculum. Moreover, intellectually better equipped and more ambitious women students typically went to the University of Bombay which occupied pride of place in the Anglophone educational life of the metropolis. Most students enrolled in the social science courses at SNDT Women's University came from a conservative social background and had narrow horizons. Many of them opted for Marathi as the medium of instruction and assessment; hence I taught bilingually in the classroom. They were so enmeshed in the web of everyday patriarchy (and academic gynocracy!) that feminism probably seemed as remote to them as the other 'isms' taught at the university. Even a whimper of protest was not heard in the early 1990s when the university authorities took away and leased out the only common room available to several hundred students on the campus. At a meeting convened by the vice chancellor (Suma Chitnis) as a prelude to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), she underscored the need to discard ideological differences in pursuit of a pragmatic agenda for women's empowerment, and I put my foot in my mouth by arguing against such sanitization.

4 The groups that emerged in Bombay during the early 1990s included the pro-feminist Men Against Violence and Abuse, the conservative Committee for the Protection of Men's Rights which fought the allegedly widespread abuse of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (meant to protect married women from cruel treatment by the husband or his relatives) by women to harass their husbands and in-laws, as also the gay-affirmative Humsafar Trust. It is worth noting that a gay conference organized by the Trust in 1994 was opposed by Vimla Farooqi, who represented the women's wing of the Communist Party of India, on the ground that homosexuality was a decadent Western import (Balakrishnan 1994).

5 Some of the key texts constituting this corpus are discussed in the following section.

6 I was not aware that precisely at this juncture 'Whiteness' was being subjected to a thorough scrutiny under the rubric of critical White studies. See Delgado and Stefancic (1997).

7 Much later I came across a contrary position articulated by Sanjay Srivastava, a sociologist who has contributed significantly to critical masculinity studies. He argued that 'pro-feminist' was at best a roundabout (and redundant) way of saying 'feminist'. To coin a phrase, 'You cannot please everybody!'

8 Cf. "A certain kind of feminism, or perhaps I should say a certain kind of feminist naiveté, died in Abu Ghraib. It was a feminism that saw men as the perpetual perpetrators, women as the perpetual victims and male sexual violence against women as the root of all injustice . . . There seemed to be at least some evidence that male sexual sadism was connected to our species' tragic propensity for violence. That was before we had seen female sexual sadism in action . . . In fact, we have come to realize, in all humility, that the kind of feminism based on an assumption of female moral superiority is not only naive; it is also a

lazy and self-indulgent form of feminism" (Ehrenreich 2004). Also see Basu (2000).

9 The editor explained the rationale of the special issue as follows: "The dynamic concept of masculinity needs to be debated sharply in the context of today's capitalistic, individualistic, voracious economy which is exacting a very high price on every family. Men and women have to struggle together to protect their world of mutual love and affection" (Sarkar 2001: 7).

10 Confreres like Rahul Roy and Sanjay Srivastava held that the term 'men's studies' had an essentialist and exclusionary (vis-à-vis feminism and women) connotation, and was best avoided for theoretical and practical political reasons. On the other hand, 'critical masculinity studies' seemed hospitable to a feminist focus on the imbrication of masculinity with class, caste, race, and sexuality.

11 The targets of his critique include some of my early publications, and as indicated previously in this chapter, I have moved beyond certain positions articulated in these exploratory essays. Vijayan (2012: 25–64) has also articulated analogous animadversions regarding the study of masculinities.

12 Radical constructivism has been questioned by many feminist scholars across a wide range of disciplines. The ecologist Patricia Adair Gowaty (2009) has critiqued the tendency to reinforce gender stereotypes which seek to naturalize male aggressiveness/promiscuity, and pointed out that male or female behaviour and inclinations are better described by a continuum; but she has also rejected the claim that 'maleness' and 'femaleness' are entirely social rather than natural categories. The political theorist Seyla Benhabib (1995) has highlighted the philosophical as well as political pitfalls involved in the deconstruction of the subject and the denial of selfhood by Judith Butler and other postmodernist theorists of gender.

13 This is particularly important as some feminists continue to have serious reservations about men's championing of women's rights. See Misra and Marwah (2015).

14 I am a founder-member of FEM, and have provided academic inputs to the activist initiatives of the organizations comprising the network (e.g. Kulkarni 2011a: 12–27).

15 I have been a fellow traveller of the Kendra from the outset.

16 The Symposium elicited the participation of 1,200 people (including representatives of NGOs and UN agencies) from 94 countries. It generated a Declaration and Call to Action which are available at http://menengage.org/resources/delhi-declaration-call-action/. As a member of the India Organizing Committee, I happily shouldered many responsibilities during the Symposium and contributed my mite to the drafting of the Declaration. Along with Jayashree Velankar, I ensured that it would include a critical reference to the nexus between patriarchy and neo-liberal globalization.

17 As a part of the pre-symposium process, I organized a seminar on 'The Representation and Reconstruction of Masculinities in Western India' under the auspices of S. P. Pune University during 12–13 September 2014. This first-ever interdisciplinary seminar on the subject

brought together a team of 40 scholars and activists to explore various aspects of masculinities and sexualities in the region within national and global perspectives to suggest directions for further research and intervention to facilitate the creation of a gender-just social order.

18 As this is an optional course, it was readily accepted by the Departmental Committee. Since it was introduced in 2012, it has attracted small groups of Indian and foreign students including men and women.

19 Gary Shapiro has used this term to characterize Nietzsche's portrayal of Jesus (Hull 2007: 109).

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Part III

# Writings


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Chapter 10

# A curious friendship

*V Geetha*

When I was 10-years-old, I was taught this poem by a rather prim English teacher. Titled 'Fame and Friendship' (by Henry Austin Dobson), it started off thus: "Fame is a food that dead men eat . . . I have no stomach for such meat. But friendship is a nobler thing/ Of friendship it is good to sing." These lines have remained with me after all these years, tendentious as they are. I have mechanically and sometimes in amused fashion muttered to myself, "Of friendship it is good to sing." I want to start this essay by affirming that platitude, and, in what follows, I trace the contours and details of a comradeship that means a great deal to me, but not in the obvious autobiographical sense. Rather, I would like to explore that landscape of consciousness for what it tells us about other places that we may yet visit and inhabit and which connect us with unlikely fellow adventurers, whose world views fascinate and compel us to listen, admire, and cherish. Such men and women may not be part of our everyday and intimate lives, but we forge with them a fellowship of the mind.

The year 1991 marked the hundredth anniversary of Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar's birth. In Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere, it signalled a moment of remembrance and celebration. It also created a context for robust debates about culture, identity, and expression. Dramatic, yet timbered, these arguments made for heady political alliances, quarrels – and curious friendships. For many of us, who participated in these exchanges, this moment in time constellated around particular texts, produced by Dalits as well as non-Dalits, which challenged the verities of Tamil literary history, the modernist canon, and which proposed a new aesthetic. For me, it marked the beginning of a delightful, passionate, and sustained interest in the work of Tamil literary historian and critic, Raj Gauthaman, whose writings I continue to follow.

Gauthaman's writings have enriched, shaped, and taken forward my sense of the Tamil literary past – and made for a rather unusual political comradeship. We recognize each other as kindred spirits – bound by a love of reading practices that are not only critical and liberating, but playful and, at times, scathing.

I first read Gauthaman's writings in 1993–1994. His beautifully written essay, on the pioneering and early Tamil novelist A. Madhavaiah, expressed critical empathy with an imagination that, in its time and place, was troubled by caste and strove to transcend it. Gauthaman clearly loved Madhaviah's work, but while that made for humour and affection, did not come in the way of unsparing critique; and one that called attention to the ways in which unexamined caste verities intrude and confuse a writer's social earnestness and ethical intent. In 1993, Gauthaman published a volume of essays, titled *Dalit Panpaddu* ([*Dalit Culture*]) in which he submitted Tamil classical literary texts to merciless re-reading. His hermeneutics was detailed, grounded in the text as well as in the larger context within which a particular text was written and transmitted – so evident in his masterly reading of the medieval classic, *Periapuranam*, a hagiography in verse of Tamil devotional poets in the Saivite tradition. Through meticulous and close reading of the text, Gauthaman pointed out how salvation and caste status are intimately linked and map on to each other. This volume was significant for another reason: its grand rejection of the literary past and open embrace of a precarious political present which had shaped Dalitness.

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Gauthaman's approach to texts and their shaping contexts, I thought at that time, was magnificently discordant: caught between the allure of the literary text and the sombre and unjust realities that shape it, he refused easy options. He was determined not to be merely politically correct, but on that account he was not going to make it easy for his readers to disengage from the sordid reality of caste. I wrote a piece – in English – on his work, comparing his approach to the past with one that was evident in the music of the great Ilayaraja, Tamil film musician and composer. Raja, I argued, sought to creatively 'plunder' the decidedly upper-caste Carnatic classical music tradition in a spirit of gay defiance, whereas Gauthaman desired to upturn his literary heritage and

reexamine all verities, while keeping his focus on the present and future. Raja, I noted, being well schooled in Western classical music on one hand and a revivified folk tradition on the other, used these as anchoring points as he set about to literally 'play' with elements of Carnatic music. Gauthaman was not eclectic, and struggled with being a critical insider, and while parodic, was less playful and more severe in his rejection of a past that had no place for him. Their gestures, I observed, represented two approaches to the problems that forbidden tradition posed for Dalit thinkers and people in the arts. This piece featured in the *Economic Times* and I sent it to Gauthaman, and was rewarded with a reply right away – he was clearly happy with what I had done, but in his inimitable way noted that reading my essay made him feel as if he had drunk of the best possible whisky!

Since receiving that flimsy inland letter, we have remained distant friends – and this has made for enigmatic and sporadic conversations on various subjects to do with literature, caste, and social action.

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, like many women of my age – we were in our late twenties or early thirties – I was drawn to feminist politics and organizing. While we spoke to and mobilized women around issues of sexual violence, domestic abuse, reproductive health, and the status of the girl child, we were acutely aware, at least in Tamil Nadu, of the fractured nature of women's experiences. The emergence of Dalit writing and organizing, and the brisk work done by civil rights groups in the early 1990s, had produced incontrovertible evidence of state and social violations that Dalits and other oppressed castes endured routinely. For all our investment in sisterhood, we had to contend with the unequal and diverse nature of women's experiences – of family, conjugality, and motherhood on the one hand, and labour, social stigma, and caste privilege on the other.

Yet, for many of us in the women's movement, especially for those who were from dominant castes, it was not easy to unravel critically and with empathy the caste-gender tangle; in spite of the fact that many of our comrades were Dalits and from the most backward castes. For those of us who spoke in public and were heard, we did not imagine that it was our privileged social locations

which enabled us to speak of patriarchy and be heard; nor did we think that our point of view might not encompass the experiences of women, who were not like us but who were with us, and yet we had not heeded the specificity of their experiences. On the other hand, we accepted with alacrity that Dalit women were thrice-oppressed, by their caste, class, as well as gender status. While we rushed to call to account Dalit patriarchy, we did not ask ourselves how Dalit women experienced the violence of caste – both at the hands of non-Dalit men as well as non-Dalit women. We also did not dwell on the reality of non-Dalit women causing hurt to Dalit men.

Part of the reason had to do with how many of us understood the class–gender relationship. In our indignant arguments with left movements and parties, which we pursued through the 1990s, we had insisted on the reality of sexual subordination and refused to accept that class was determinate in the last instance – even the working class, we noted, was not free from patriarchy and the latter was certainly as fundamental as class oppression. We adopted the same reasoning to insist that caste alone cannot be the determining factor in measuring Dalit women's experiences. In retrospect it seems to me that our critique of 'Dalit patriarchy' failed to grasp the simple truth that Dalit women shared greater experiential ground with Dalit men than they did with other women. Further, our rhetorical affirmation of sisterhood, with Dalit women, prevented us from seeing that such an affective relationship had to be demonstrated, not assumed as given, and renewed through affective and comradely acts. Also, we did not think through the shaping power of caste – and the manner it impinged on every aspect of our public and intimate lives. Sadly, we did not grasp the harsh fact that caste truncates social and ethical life of the entire social order, reserving its worst violence for Dalits, both men and women.

It was in such a context that I came to read Gauthaman's work. I was at that time working on the Tamil anti-caste and Non-brahmin movements and his revisionist reading of the Sangam corpus of poems (of the 2nd century CE) – presented first in *Dalit Paarvaiyil Tamizh Panpaadu* (1994) [Tamil Literature from a Dalit Perspective] – offered a brilliant and refreshing perspective on what exists in both scholarly and popular consciousness as a veritable Tamil 'golden' age. The Sangam corpus to this day remains an archive of a past that is viewed as relatively untouched by brahminical Hinduism and the varna order. In our collective memory, the poems from that corpus validate all that we find desirable in the present: and in that sense,

they appear a record of a time that may be recalled at will to not only animate the past, but illuminate the future.

However, Gauthaman did something audacious with these poems: he identified scores of references in them that spoke of women's labour, desire, and their obvious investment in an interior world, of love, sensuousness, and happiness. He also pointed out that women were keen that the men they loved valued this world and did not seek to leave it, either to make a fortune or to follow a whim. He argued that the world of women – the interior landscape, as A. K. Ramanujan so aptly translated it – where erotic love, affection, and nurture reigned supreme belonged to the pre-history of caste. This sensuous life, he went on to observe, was trammelled and distorted by the logic of varnadharma, which in turn emerged as a norm, with the shattering of small self-sufficient worlds through conquest, extension of agriculture, and the movement of people in and through different landscapes.

I was struck by the novelty of his arguments, and while I was somewhat troubled by his rather ahistorical valorization of female sensuousness, I realized that he was in fact speaking to contemporary appropriations of the past, which were wont to celebrate male valour, virility, and honour, and claim these for modern Tamil political projects, particularly various versions of Tamil nationalism. Gauthaman's decisive emphasis on female life worlds unsettled standard recalls of the past; at the same time, he argued for a 'feminist' reclaiming and one that was determined to tease out normative meanings from women's experiences of love, passion, nurture, and affection. Gauthaman also made it clear that critical re-readings had to be risked, and that meaning had to be mined, literally from words and their contexts. His choices, he argued, were made in the face of other readings, which were available and possible, and which readily assented to the objectification of women's sensuous energy and their social roles.

As I read and re-read his *Dalit Paarvaiyil Tamil Panpaddu*, I realized that he was in fact making a case for the relative autonomy of the gender question – he did not think it could be understood entirely in terms of structures of kinship, conjugality, or caste, rather it also had to be approached in its materiality, in how it was lived in and through bodily practices. I noticed too that he established the relevance of his thesis in a rather ingenious fashion – through the use of a clever literary device. The text's narrative was punctuated by responses from a listening audience, comprising contemporary Dalits who questioned, retarded, and advanced its progress. This audience

functioned as a chorus that commented on the narrator's interest in and interpretation of a distant history. For instance, it wondered if it was indeed useful to dwell on times past, and in any case, why was there such interest in life worlds that actually are not exceptional, given that they resembled those of many working people like themselves. The audience was also not quite sure about 'Tamil culture'. What was exceptional about it? Did not Tamil chiefs and kings defer to brahmins, and were not they as disdainful of those who laboured for a living? When the narrator argued that old texts constructed women's lives and experiences in ways that answered to male anxieties, a young man in the audience was offended; and when the narrator spoke of how these texts represented women's bodies, a woman in the audience shuddered at the impropriety of such portrayals.

Juxtaposing his own interest in the past with such 'naïve' responses allowed Gauthaman to self-consciously reflect on how history's victims received the past, and if their victim status granted them a clarity that may not be had elsewhere. He suggests that while much may be valuable in subaltern world views, subaltern perspectives on gender are perhaps as problematic as mainstream ones, and the problem, he suggests, has to do with a generalized ethics that guides our lives, both of those in caste society and those who are placed outside of it.

Reading this text in the mid-1990s, at a time when the women's movement was being called to order, criticized, and rejected by Dalit feminists, and indeed by Dalit political leaders for being obsessed with individual experiences of violence and hurt, I experienced an inchoate sense of relief – troubled and anguished as I was, like many others, with the violence of sex and caste, I did not have the clarity or experience to understand how these experiences may be held together. Gauthaman's book appeared to have done it and I felt relief at such clarity. Not that I acted on that sense of relief to say or do something dramatic, but I realized the importance of heeding not only Dalit women, but also perhaps Dalit men – in short Dalit life worlds. Gauthaman's subsequent work, particularly the book that expanded on the theme of sensuousness, gender, and caste, proved even more electrifying.

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The ethics that lies at the heart of caste patriarchy, rather the making of it, was the subject of his *Arram Adigaram* (*Ethics/Power*) that

was published a few years hence in 1997 (it has since been revised and re-issued as *Tamizh Samuthayathil Arramum Aattralum* [*Ethics and Capabilities in Tamil Society*]). Here, he does away with literary devices and writes a straightforward narrative. The (original 1997) text comprised 11 densely argued chapters and drew not only from the Sangam corpus of texts, but also what followed it, ethical literature, especially of the Jainas and Buddhists and bhakthi devotional verse. Modelling his argument on that outlined by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Gauthaman sketched in the details of a complex social and historical process that systematically and over time disciplined and repressed experiences of sensuousness – so as to affirm and consolidate an ethical order that matched the hierarchical logic of caste society. He also demonstrated how these punitive and disciplinary acts were constitutively gendered.

I have returned to these essays several times over the last decade and more – to understand better the intertwined logic of gender and caste arrangements, and the ethics that underwrite the latter. I would therefore like to dwell at some length on their content.

Interestingly, Gauthaman picks apart a set of ethical imperatives that lie at the heart of what is considered 'Tamil' culture and morality, drawing at will from the textual traditions that he had chosen to read against their grain. Thus he examines the phenomenon of gift-giving, which is often upheld as the mark of a virtuous man, whether ruler or householder. Gauthaman notes how the hand which laboured and wrought material human existence is not as present in these ancient texts. Rather it is the hand which gives out largesse and the hand that receives it, which are celebrated. In this unequal scheme of things, the receiver remains passive, and always a supplicant, whereas the giver is recalled in hoary song and verse, and praised. Gift-giving, Gauthaman argues, was an important aspect of an emergent authority in clan life and further helped to secure civic virtue: for it was also the hallmark of the ideal household. In this sense, it was essentially a gendered norm, for it was proclaimed that a good woman was one who desired and valued a home where the husband was guided in his actions by an ethic of benevolence (Gauthaman 1997: 39).

Gauthaman also subjects the cherished value of friendship to acute critique: he points out how, over time, friendship replaces brotherhood and clan loyalties, and is construed as a relationship that is both reciprocal and demanding. It requires particular services and passions and heeds no other ideal than the delicate one

of gratitude. Gauthaman argues that gratitude binds in fealty one man to another, as nothing else does, and suggests that this ethic of friendship emerged at a time when exchange and trade relationships were underscored by the forging of legitimate and valid social ties. Friendship, Gautman points out, is always between men, or as the ethical texts say, between two equal and self-possessed beings. Thus there can be no friendship between men and women. Neither is the phenomenon of female friendship relevant for a consideration of this ethic: for one, such friendships are not central to social practices, and more importantly, women's bodies existed as measures of male friendships. Many an ethical text warns that the sin of ingratitude is as grave an act as the violation of a friend's wife. A Sangam poem proclaims that a man who is guilty of ingratitude has sinned more than one who had aborted a woman's child forcibly (p. 63).

Like friendship, the ideal of knowledge was one reserved for men (but obviously not for all men). Gauthaman notes that the repeated hyperbolic references in Sangam as well as ethical literature to the authority that comes with knowledge valorize the 'low-born' man who overcomes his lowliness through the power of his knowledge. But, argues Gauthaman, the example of the low-born learner is misleading, for it exists as a figure of speech, rather than as a semantic or sociological possibility (p. 68). Gauthaman also points out that the power of the mind existed in direct proportion to the devaluation of matter, in this case, the body and its functions. This devaluing of the senses, he argues, happened at that historical moment when the human body ceased to be an instrument of production and survival and took to examining its own surplus, in this instance, the autonomous and gratuitous activity of the mind (pp. 72–73). The marginalization of sensuousness, of the knowledge implicit in such marginalization, was homologous to the subordination of women and their imprisonment within a fragmented and contained life of the body.

The devaluing of the senses, indeed the complete punishing and repression of them, was a theme repeatedly advanced in Tamil Jaina and Buddhist texts; unlike those who consider these antinomian and therefore subversive of the brahminical order, Gauthaman views them as enunciating an ideal of renunciation – these texts, he argues, called for a permanent vigilance against sensuous activity, whether this was eating or loving. Further, the ideal of renunciation was resolutely for men. For, it was an experience that men cultivated and precisely because they wished to stay the power that

women had over them, in fact over their very souls. Gauthaman observes shrewdly that the ideal of renunciation emerged in a society given over to extended production and trade. In effect, it was productive labour which secured for the ascetic his selfhood, and it was the householder's wife who nurtured his wasted flesh. It was small wonder then that in these poems women while accepting the ideal of renunciation nevertheless upheld the claims of the sensuous life – they invoked the doctrine of impermanence to call attention to the folly of wasted youth and thwarted pleasures of love (pp. 96–105)!

Having demonstrated the evolution of important ethical principles, Gauthaman next turns his attention to those who embodied these principles: kings, brahmins, agriculturists, and merchants. He maps the evolution of those virtues which were considered specific to each class of men onto the religions which commanded their reverence – Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism. The ethical imperatives which governed men were not binding on women. Women were called to underscore the salience of these norms: as mothers and wives in a sociological sense; as subjects of grammar, to further accentuate an argument; and as metaphors and icons that embodied ideas and values to which they bore no social and historical relationship.

Gauthaman's readings of the feminine presence in Sangam and ethical literature are by far the most thought-provoking. He points out that specific ethical directives which addressed women had to do solely with their sexuality. Women were not considered moral agents in their own right. They were not expected to abide by notions of the general good, or the common weal. Women became the subject of ethics only in the context of their bodies. On their bodies were writ the laws that bound them. Thus a woman was expected to remain chaste, loyal to the man she loves, and ever conscious of her duty to her husband and home. Her good conduct alone could guarantee an affectionate and loving home. She possessed the power to love and sustain it, and it was this love which strengthened and nurtured men (pp. 159–160). Men were enjoined to not desire wrongfully: the most rigorous punishment was reserved for those who coveted another man's wife. Such coveting, if realized, it was argued, could destroy the very basis of civilization. True manhood lay in exercising control over oneself, not in giving in to one's baser emotions (pp. 161–162).

In sexual love, men overcame women, women submitted. Modesty became women, whereas men were expected to triumph by the

strength of their prowess and will (p. 164). The act of love, sexual intercourse, was akin to eating food in one's own home. If passion signified an illness of being, love-making served as balm. Under no circumstances should men and women strive to be like each other. That would spell disaster, and bring about the end of the world. Women, for example, should not venture forth to be intellectual; nor should they surrender their quintessential qualities of modesty, reticence, and chastity. Neither should a man be like a woman, for if he abdicated his manhood he was nothing but a eunuch, an impotent person (p. 175).

A certain strand of ethical literature though was less prescriptive: rather than legislate for women, it preferred to consign them to the realm of the immoral and the unclean. Women were considered insidious in their intent, frail in their affections, and mercurial in their reasoning. Their bodies were considered fit to be dismembered in verse: elaborate descriptions of their breasts, hips, vagina, and so on are legion in this sort of literature (pp. 176–180). The greatest scorn was reserved for the courtesan and the prostitute: either was accused as being loveless, crafty, a speaker of sweet but false words, avaricious and grasping, and as the very opposite of the good, chaste wife. The point is that each required the other to exist: that is, wifely chastity appeared all the more resplendent in contrast to the prostitute's heartless art of love.

Gauthaman points out that more often than not the ideal woman was the propertied householder's wife. Womanly virtues were defined in such a way that she never transgressed the limits set to love and passion in a stratified society. Her honour was made an index of her husband's social status. The higher his standing in society, the more stringent the ethical codes that were imposed on her (p. 159).

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Gauthaman's deft unravelling of the two most important aspects of the moral code of the caste order – the shame and control imposed on the female body and the stigma imposed on labouring Dalit and other stigmatized bodies – is a masterly exercise in feminist criticism. At the time I read this remarkable text, I don't think I grasped it, in all its nuance; but as I have noted, I kept going back to it. Struggling to make sense of the caste–gender conundrum within the existential space of the women's movement, even as I worked hard

at writing a history of Tamil anti-caste movements, I found Gauthaman's work speaking to both these concerns – yet the scale of what he had attempted appeared overwhelming that I did not quite know how to make them do duty to the present.

Neither did I bring up issues to do with Dalit politics or Dalit feminism with him. I did not find it easy to speak to him on these matters. It was as if my friendship with him occupied a different zone, where I was content to read, talk, and learn about his writings, and for his part, he valued conversation about his work. Today, as I look back, I feel tempted to say that between the worlds of feminist activism and literary arguments we managed to find subtle ground to articulate what was not entirely speakable in either of these realms. I did not know how to speak with Dalit men, from within my activist space, whereas I could from a textual space. Gauthaman was happy not to be read solely within the Tamil literary context, and was glad for a feminist interlocutor.

Over time I have come to understand Gauthaman's critical intent better – if indeed one may call it that. He was eager to urge forward a political and philosophical worldview that encompassed the concerns that animated those who, potentially and in reality, challenge Tamil caste patriarchy – particularly, feminists and Dalit activists and thinkers. Clearly he did not think that any of them could do this on their own, but he did not imagine a 'rainbow' coalition of persons and groups could be the solution. Feminist concerns with sexual oppression and violence spoke to his imagination, and at the same time, his ethical passion was reserved for those who were committed to the annihilation of caste. He did not wish to privilege the one against the other; nor did he seek to establish an easy equivalence between the two. With great conceptual grace, he held together the violence directed at women, and which secured their complicity with the caste order, and the abjectness imposed on men and women of the labouring castes and classes.

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My friendship with Gauthaman, I realize today, was not only on account of his inspired reading of the caste–gender conundrum. I was moved and stimulated by his critical generosity. His readings in literature demonstrated how one could admire, relish, and yet criticize a set of books, ideas, and traditions. He also indicated that one ought to learn to distinguish the power of words, their

aesthetic charge from what they sought to describe and sometimes justify – this is particularly evident in that masterly book he wrote on the great Tamil modern writer, Pudumaipithan. *Pudumaipithan Ennum Brahmarakshas* (2000) [*A Brahmarakshas Called Pudumaipithan*] held the renowned writer to account for his inability at times to speak beyond what was offered by his caste location; yet Gauthaman insisted that there were moments in his writings which captured a certain human capacity for leaping over the banalities of the social order and access a worldview that is at once luminous, ironic, and poignant. These odd moments, Gauthaman argued, have to be claimed for the future, as representing aesthetic power and energy that survives the hold of the present and which Dalit literature ought to make its own.

Gauthaman went on to explore such moments and epiphanies as these existed in the thought world of two remarkable men of the 19th century – the Tamil Saivite heretic, Ramalinga Vallalar, and the Dalit-Buddhist, Iyothee Thass. His work on the life and thought of these two men are in reality poignant accounts of the interlinked themes of self-making, recognition of social suffering, and transcendence.

Such imaginative generosity allowed non-Dalits like me to both comprehend that great anger and anguish which a review of history and culture instil in Dalit thinkers, as well as feel humbled by that faith in transcendence which the latter affirmed.

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As I continue to ponder over an adequate feminist response to Gauthaman's work, I wonder at times if it ought to be necessarily ideological and political – as I remarked at the beginning of this essay, there is a comradeship of the mind. To be sure such comradeship is sustained by shared political – and ethical – concerns, but it is also self-delighting, and it seems to me there is great virtue to such affection.

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Chapter 11

# Challenging caste, doing gender

## Paradoxes of male writings in North India

*Charu Gupta*

Any discussion on 'men doing feminism' has to engage with the question of how significant is one's sex, race, caste, or religion when writing about someone of a different sex, race, caste, or religion? Linked to this concern is the question of the rigidity of these boundaries. There have been prickly debates on whether whites write in the same way about blacks as black people themselves. Can white women write with sensitivity about black women? And can men in general write about women in ways which are anti-patriarchal? In India, similar debates have raged on can upper castes or non-Dalits write on lower castes or Dalits in a perceptive way? Can only Dalits exhibit Dalit consciousness (Brueck 2014: 52)? And then, those on the margins – Dalit men, gay men – can they write in a sensitive way about other margins – women? Since Dalit men (and gay men), by their very location, challenge hegemonic ideals of maleness and masculinity, by extension, can there be a productive coming together of them and feminism?

In a thought-provoking collection, academicians have debated the ability of white scholars, even with the best intentions, to sufficiently comprehend the nature of black experience, being, as they are, far removed from the actual life experiences of being black. They have looked at the vexations and ideological, pedagogical, and historical complexities faced by white scholars who teach and research African American literature (Long 2005). The tilt of the collection is towards arguing that though there are problems and limitations of such an endeavour, it is a creative way to go ahead. The late Nwlliw Y. McKay (2005: xii–iv) thus argues that while experiencing culture can be useful to understand its expressive aspects, it is not the only measure, and that there is also something of value in having the perspectives of outsiders to a culture as

participants in the critical discourse evaluating its productions. She further contends that in multiracial, multiethnic societies, crossing of all boundaries is productive for questioning hierarchies and power.

Similarly, many feminists, and perhaps rightly so, have expressed reservations about men doing feminism, arguing that being a man within patriarchy means that you will – whether you are aware of it or not – exercise male privilege. They also contend that a man cannot really say he is a feminist as he has not experienced life as a woman under patriarchy, and that men cannot be true allies of feminism as masculinity has been defined as part of the problem of patriarchy (for some such questions: Goldrick-Jones 2002: 6). Since men are implicated and involved in histories of subjugation, they cannot be a part of feminism. Worries are also expressed that discussions on men doing feminism would unintentionally make men themselves the focus of feminism.

At the same time, many feminists themselves have stressed the importance of avoiding the placement of women in an overarching category of 'woman', pointing to the fallacy of viewing women as homogenous entities, and instead have emphasized differentials within women, taking into account caste, class, religion, and nation. Moreover, biology, which in any case itself points to ambiguous sexual and gender identities, is not enough to qualify one as a feminist or an expert on women's studies. Binary oppositions between women and men, which assume the former to be insiders and hence privileged in feminist discourses, often cannot take us very far. The permeable nature of gender boundaries, and cross-gender transactions, located at crucial intersections of male–female experiences, provide much more complex readings, and make the venture of crossing boundaries much more significant (Long 2005). While one has to constantly engage with the pitfalls of such an endeavour, it can also have potentially productive possibilities as it challenges the universality of gender as a category, and straight jacketed links between femininity, masculinity, and biology.

So, what, as Tom Digby (1998) asks, does men doing feminism entail? Is it a mere additive category, or does studying men involved with writing on gender issues with sensitivity enhance the critical edge of feminism in important ways? How have men in India located themselves theoretically against domination, power, and patriarchy (Chowdhury and Al Baset 2015)? What are the potentialities and possibilities of engaging with such histories? Does the questioning

of hegemonic masculinities by men play a critical role in making our history more gender-sensitive? Scholars have, for example, pointed out how men in caring occupations do gender differently, at times questioning existing hierarchical arrangements, resisting dominant conceptions of masculinity, and reducing gender differences (Simpson 2009: 12–13). bell hooks (2015: 68–83) supports men's involvement in feminism, referring to them as 'comrades in struggle', and argues that anti-male sentiments have often alienated poor, working-class, non-white women from the feminist movement. Still others have narrated stories of anti-sexist men, who have helped in bringing about gender justice and equality (Goldrick-Jones 2002). In the beautifully written biography of the gay philosopher and sex reformer Edward Carpenter, leading socialist-feminist historian Shiela Rowbotham (2008) gives us a compelling portrait of a man who, among other things, was an advocate of free love, nudism, and women's suffrage in the late 19th/early 20th centuries. Placing him in a social and historical context, Rowbotham further shows how Carpenter combined the personal with the political, and in many ways anticipated the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

The meanings of womanhood and femininity for men have differed across different groups and classes, and shifted over space, time, and history. Historically, in India, there have been men who have been pioneers in raising the women's question. At the same time, feminist scholarship on colonial India has been extremely critical of gendered constructions in the writings of male reformers of 19th-century India, during the high point of social reform movements. They have rightly pointed out that though women were ostensibly central to the reformist endeavour, all the earlier initiatives and decisions were taken largely by men; that the reformers belonged mostly to the upper castes and emerging elite classes; that they mainly addressed problems of upper-caste, middle-class Hindu women; that they distanced themselves from syncretic and popular religious and cultural practices, particularly of women; and that they often strengthened nationalist patriarchies (Sangari and Vaid 1989; Forbes 1996). And yet, as Tanika Sarkar points out, some of the liberal reformist and nationalist individuals were brave men for their times. They were pioneers in voicing women's issues, seeing women as rights-bearing persons. Even while often adopting a language of scriptures and tradition, they were introducing new and 'dangerous' words of gender equality, women's will, and justice. They operated against various orthodoxies and conservatisms, and faced considerable ostracism.

The avant-garde efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy in the abolition of *sati*, Vidyasagar in pushing for widow-remarriage, Behramji Malabari in raising the age of consent, and many others, cannot be denied, even while recognizing their limitations and lacunae. Thus, Sarkar (2009: 13–68), for example, again points out how the troupe of consent of widow, her agency or non-agency, functioned as a pivot in male discourses of the period. In today's context, what may appear as banal, may have been quite radical for its time.

The pioneering work of Ashis Nandy (1983) shows how Gandhi subverted the British argument of inherent superiority of 'masculinity' by not only glorifying the 'feminine' and seeing it as worthier and preferred, but also by using the metaphor to challenge the British in profound ways. Again, feminist scholars have underlined the problems in Gandhi's positions, whereby he identified sacrifice and the ability to suffer specifically with women. His views were a mixed bag, with various paradoxes between his statements and actions. But he also empowered many women to join in public action for the first time, giving them an important agency, and believing firmly that women were critical for bringing the fight for nationalism into every home, no matter what caste, class, or religion (Kishwar 1985; Patel 1988). Thus Geraldine Forbes (1996) remarks that Gandhi gave women a blueprint for action and a chance to stand and speak in public. J Devika (2007) has shown that Gandhian arguments that women had certain 'natural qualities' and a 'gentle power' that made them worthy in the political-public domain were appropriated by several authors and reformers in Kerala at this time to carve out a niche for women and stress their worthiness in governing local bodies and civic institutions.

Scholars have also complicated discourses around masculinity by linking it to debates around homosexuality and same-sex love and desire in colonial India (Vanita and Kidwai 2000). Further, from the 1920s, with the growth of scientific sexology and birth control movements, sexual pleasure came to be emphasized as critical for conjugal compatibility by some male sexologists in India. R. D. Karve, N. S. Phadke, and, most importantly, A. P. Pillai, even while guided by eugenic reasoning and arguments of sex within heterosexual marital paradigms and through the prism of male fulfilment, came to recognize the importance of women's desires and sexual satisfaction for a successful, companionate marriage. They had an impact on a section of the urban middle classes (Ahluwalia 2008; Hodges 2008; Srivastava 2007).

More significantly, in the past few decades, the intersections between anti-caste thought and gender have emerged as central in the work of some scholars working with a Dalit feminist lens, predominantly with a west and south India focus. They show how male caste radicals, be it Jotirao Phule, B. R. Ambedkar, or E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar), launched significant critiques of caste and gender from outside Indian nationalism's discursive frame, while distinctly drawing, and challenging, connections between sexual regulation and caste reproduction. Uma Chakravarti (2003: 107–11) and Anupama Rao (2009: 50–68) demonstrate the contradictory contours of sexuality, marriage, family, and social reform in anti-Brahmin politics of Maharashtra. For example, Anupama Rao underscores how Phule and Satyashodhak Samaj used the same vocabulary to equate the plight of women with that of lower castes, as both were defined as impure, polluting, and subjected to stringent regulation. While emphasizing the greater burdens of chastity and caste purity that disciplined upper-caste women, Satyashodhak activists ridiculed the upper castes for the treatment meted out to widows, and used this to critique Brahmanical mores. Evolving a new gendered language to contest their marginalization, Satyashodak marriages eliminated the need for a Brahmin priest and emphasized self-respect and equality within marriage. The late Sharmila Rege (2013: 13–56) reclaimed some of Ambedkar's writings, which imagined new caste-gender codes and trenchantly critiqued endogamy, as feminist classics. Ambedkar, for instance, wrote that intermarriage was the most important way of annihilating caste, since it alone acknowledged the relationship between the maintenance of caste purity and the control of women's sexuality. V Geetha (2003) and S. Anandhi (1998) have unveiled the radical embrace of marriage as a partnership of two political comrades outside family, and contraception as a means of sexual pleasure, by Periyar and Self-Respecters of Tamilnadu, who consistently challenged the link between sexual regulation and caste apartheid. Even though male caste radicals were by no means immune to the extension of novel patriarchal practices into their own households, it is significant that it was precisely in the period when reforms centred on women seemed to largely disappear from the upper-caste agenda that they made their mark in other arenas like the emerging political activism of women themselves, as well as in anti-caste movements (Rao 2003, 2009: 50–68).

The rest of this essay attempts to examine, through two fragmentary examples and disparate sites, how some men have engaged in writing histories and stories of women (particularly Dalits) in north India in the vernacular, and the gendered meanings of their writings. First, I take up some stories by Premchand (the leading male Hindi writer of the early 20th century, who also belonged to an upper caste), where low-caste women are often the main protagonists. Second, I study some present-day popular Dalit male writings in Hindi on the revolt of 1857, which have focused on Dalit *viranganas* (heroic women). I am concerned with these writings because in very different ways they attempt to challenge caste, and in the process deeply intersect with gender. I explore the limitations and productive possibilities, ambiguities, and flexibilities of such an enterprise for feminism. I simultaneously underscore how gendered caste representations in these writings implicitly questioned normative definitions and contested power, thus opening spaces for subversive appropriations, which has also been a key feature and basis of feminism. Shaped by contexts and contingent practices, these writings may not be concerned with feminism per se; yet they have troubled stereotypes of women and produced cracks in dominant gender embodiments. They construct and question gender normativity and femininity in ambivalent ways, representing a complex, fluid terrain. It is tempting to refer to these writings as proto-feminist texts, as at times they prompt conformity, but at others also trigger resistance.

In the process I foreground representations of Dalit women by men and address print as a significant, if ambivalent, site for the reproduction, transformation, and contestation of caste and gender ideologies. Representation of Dalit women by men can be a multipurpose tool, open to divergent receptions and interpretations. Even while formulating Dalit women in certain ways, it also has the ability to 'unmake' these very formulations and 'unread' dominant inscriptions on gendered caste bodies, while highlighting the emancipatory possibilities through counter-readings.

## Beyond victimhood? Dalit women in Premchand's stories

Premchand (1880–1936) has been regarded by many as the father of modern Hindi literature and the finest story teller of colonial north India. In his writings, perhaps for the first time, Dalit actors

significantly made their presence felt in canonized Hindi literature. Premchand's representation of Dalits has provoked intense discussions, and many books (Kantimohan 2010; Jadhav 1992; Shahi 2000; Sambhariya 2011; Upadhyay 2002: 51–79; Brueck 2014; Gajarawala 2013). Celebration and uncritical praise of him as a writer with deep sensitivity towards Dalits has been countered by incisive criticism, and sometimes, downright denunciation, by many leading Hindi Dalit male writers. His story 'Kafan' has particularly faced the wrath of authors like Omprakash Valmiki and Mohandas Naimishray (for details: Shahi 2000: 110; Sharma 2006: 88–92; Brueck 2014: 43–60), with Dharamvir (2005) even branding him as a champion of the feudal lords. The humanist positions of Premchand vis-à-vis Dalits and women has been viewed skeptically, with arguments of caste and gender difference creating unbridgeable gaps in his knowledge and understanding. Toral Gajarawala (2013) thus argues that in Premchand's writings "the architecture of sympathy rests on caste and gender" (Gajarawala 2013: 46), but in the process, it leads to "a kind of formal erasure of caste as an analytic" (Ibid: 35). Kanwal Bharti (2011: 89–170), a Dalit scholar, has offered a discerning view of Premchand from a Dalit perspective, placing him in the context of his times. Some Dalit criticisms of Premchand have been perceptively analyzed by Laura Brueck (2014: 43–60), where she has simultaneously reflected on how some Dalit women writers like Anita Bharti, Vimal Thorat, and Puspa Vivek hold more nuanced perspectives through a gendered terrain. She concludes:

> Premchand emerges as a singularly powerful cultural symbol that participants in the Dalit counterpublic sphere can use to advance various social and political agendas that support the construction of communal and individual counterpublic identities. A critique of Premchand is at the core of both a reconstitution of the Dalit public sphere as a counterpublic and in developing the power to effectively enter the mainstream literary sphere.
>
> (Brueck 2014: 60)

Every Dalit character in each story and novel of Premchand has been scrutinized from different perspectives. There has been an equally rich body of literary work on Premchand's portrayal of women, in which he has often been eulogized (Lal 1965; Avasthi

1962), as his writings carved out distinct sympathies for women. One writer remarks:

> Premchand's feelings towards women are as comprehensive as the sky, as idealistic as the power of light, as practical and useful as a quiet flow of river, as sympathetic as the cords of sitar.
> (Avasthi 1962: 45)

Some feminists also maintain that Premchand ultimately upholds a conservative ideal for women (Pandey 1996: 2187). I have earlier argued that Premchand, even when cast in a reformist mould, grasps gendered social realities of his times effectively. His stories offer a mixed legacy. Seen from a contemporary viewpoint, we can often discern strains of an 'ideal', subordinated womanhood. Yet, when examined in their historical context, some of his women characters were brave pioneers, expanding the frontiers of gender consciousness at a time when they were severely limited. Some of his stories depicted men as evil, offering a challenge to patriarchy, and often coinciding with the viewpoints of the women's movement at that time (Gupta 1991). At the same time, most such writings, including my own, lacked the sensitivity of a Dalit feminist perspective. Drawing upon writings by Dalits and women, while also complicating them, this section places Dalit women actors in some of Premchand's short stories at the centre of analysis.

In most of Premchand's representations of Dalit women, the paradigm of victimhood, combined with a romanticized idealism, can be discerned. However, Premchand seems at times to go beyond these images, when he registers insurgent Dalit women's voices, and it is perhaps here that the dominant rubric of social reformers begins to fracture, if not fall apart. Such depictions however were never distinct and crisscrossed each other.

The most compelling of Premchand's evocations is that of Dalit woman as victim. In his story 'Mandir' (May 1927) (Premchand 1984, V: 5–13), the *chamarin* widow Sukhiya goes to the temple to pray for her extremely ill son but is denied entry by the Brahmin priest. The pain of her unfulfilled wish and the abuse she is subjected to leads to the death of both child and mother. Before her death Sukhiya painfully voices against the upper-caste men and priests:

> My touch will make the God untouchable! Keep him locked, guard him. You do not have an iota of sympathy . . . And you

> claim to be protectors of *dharm*! You are murderers, undiluted murderers!
>
> (Premchand 1984, V: 13)

The story seems to be largely inspired by the temple entry agitation, which was at its peak around this time, and mirrors its several ambiguities. Choosing a Dalit woman as his protagonist, instead of the male-centric discourse of the movement, Premchand embraces Sukhiya within a Hindu paradigm, painfully portrays her silent suffering and sacrifice, scorns the Brahmin priest, and suggests reforms from above and within, cast in a Gandhian mould. Similarly, choosing the other dominant issue of the times, drawing of water from all wells by Dalits, his brief story 'Thakur ka Kuan' (August 1932) (Premchand 1984, I: 141–4) again genders the issue, and has Gangi, a Dalit woman, in the lead role. While attempting to draw water from the well of a *thakur* for her extremely ill husband Jokhu, Gangi fails to do so, and she reaches home to find Jokhu drinking the dirty water from the pot. She reflects on both *thakur* and moneylender:

> They indulge in theft, in cheating, in false cases . . . They get work done without paying wages. How are they higher to us then? . . . If I come to the village sometimes, they start looking at me with lustful-lecherous eyes.
>
> (Premchand 1984, I: 142)

Another story 'Dudh ka Daam' (Premchand 1984, II: 204–14) is about a *bhangan* midwife Bhungi, who is also a surrogate mother to the son of the upper-caste landlord. She keeps her own child hungry at the cost of her employer's son, but receives nothing except leftovers for her son. In these stories, upper-caste men emerge as negative and wicked characters. Repugnance towards them and their prevailing customs is intertwined with the taciturn endurance of Dalit woman, arousing the reader's sympathy for her, but leaving little room for decisive collective action. These stories generally fit within the borders of victimhood, imbibing familiar reformist themes of suffering, sentimentality, sympathy, and subservience. The conclusion of the narrative, however, is not necessarily the last word, since subterranean tensions are often discernible in tone and language, particularly in Premchand's incisive critique of upper-caste men.

While these stories treated hierarchical caste prohibitions to which Dalit women were subjected to at the hands of priests and

landlords, Premchand also commented on relations among Dalit women and men. Researchers have noted how in some of Premchand's stories, there was a degree of romanticization of Dalit women, since they were portrayed as having more freedom and greater equality with their men, than their counterparts in upper-caste households "by virtue of their hard work both inside and outside the home" (Upadhyay 2002: 55–8). Such images have been questioned by scholars and Dalit feminists, since they sometimes deflect attention from Dalit patriarchies. At the same time, low-caste women appear in Premchand's stories as more outspoken against domestic violence. For example the story 'Abhilasha' (October 1928) (Premchand 1984, IV: 93–9) starts with a low-caste man beating his wife. Angrily, she says: "Stop beating me as it is not at all right or acceptable. I have no relationship with you from today" (Premchand 1984, IV: 93). Giving space to the less stringent sexual norms among Dalit castes, the story 'Balak' (April 1933) (Premchand 1984, II: 215–24) shows Gangu marrying a low-caste widow, about whom it is said that she is "characterless". However, Gangu loves her dearly and is very happy with her. After some time, he comes to know that she is pregnant with someone else's child. Gangu has no hesitation in accepting him as his own. He says: "I did not marry you because you were a goddess but because I loved you. I took a planted field, so will I leave its crop simply because somebody else has planted it?" (Premchand 1984, II: 223).

However, Premchand also often portrayed low-caste women as 'ideal', chaste wives. In his story 'Sati' (May 1932) (Premchand 1984, IV: 145–53), for instance, low-born beautiful Mulia is married to ugly Kallu. Because of her beauty, Kallu cannot trust Mulia, even though she is faithful to him. For her part, however, Mulia serves her distrustful husband dutifully and nurses him when he falls ill. But he dies. His cousin Raja tries to win over Mulia. But she remains unmoved. Second marriage is not for her. She has decided to live like a *sati*. In another story called 'Devi' (April 1935) (Premchand 1978: 61–2), the husband of 'untouchable' Tulia never returns from a trip on which he had embarked in order to make money. Tulia remains his and his alone forever. These stories may be interpreted at different levels. They can be seen as replicating upper-caste ideals of the chaste and loyal wife for low-caste women as well, denying them remarriage. They can, however, also be understood as interrogating the typecasting of low-caste women as sexually deviant, loose, and unfaithful. Impersonating assumed upper-caste norms

by Dalit women can also acquire potentially challenging meanings. In attributing chastity to Dalit women, Premchand is both upholding certain perceived upper-caste norms and overtly challenging the prevalent imagery of Dalit women.

Inter-caste romances, relationships, and marriages did not escape the attention of Premchand. Thus 'Subhagi' (Premchand 1984, I: 258–67) is about the 'ideal' low-caste child widow, who in the end marries an upper-caste man. In 'Saubhagya ke Kore' (Premchand 1984, III: 220–33), a high-caste Brahmin woman Ratna ends up marrying a Bhangi, albeit one who is now a well-established teacher of theology. While he hides his caste from his wife, she instantly recognizes him as a result of previous encounters, and knowingly goes ahead with this inter-caste marriage. At the same time, she asks him never to let her father know his caste. It appears that Premchand implicitly recognizes inter-caste marriage as a way of edging caste prejudices, and yet often keeps it muted. The most contentious of the issues for reformers, inter-caste marriage sees Premchand tread cautiously.

Though Premchand appears to be uncomfortable on questions of sexuality, in one or two of his stories, intersections between gender, caste, and sexual exploitation emerge in compelling ways, revealing such oppression as especially unique to Dalit women. Premchand is perhaps at his creative best here, as he portrays Dalit women here not as subservient victims but as defiant protesters in their own right. These voices are far more effective, precisely because they are those of Dalit woman. 'Ghaswali' (December 1929) (Premchand 1984, I: 305–17) is a particularly important story here. In this story Mulia is a poor Chamar woman who is sexually harassed by the upper-caste landowner Chain Singh. To him, it is 'natural' to assume that a sweet face among Dalit women is meant solely to become the plaything of the upper-caste men. He has won many such victories, but Muliya rejects his advances. She accuses him spiritedly:

> If my man would have talked to your wife the same way, how would you have felt? . . . You ask me for kindness, because I am a *chamarin*, from a low caste and a low caste woman is easy to win either by threats or by small temptation. What a cheap bargain it is! You are a *thakur*. Why would you relinquish such a cheap bargain?
>
> (Premchand 1984, I: 309)

At this, Chain Singh claims: "I am ready to keep my head on your feet." In turn Mulia replies:

> Because you know that I cannot do anything about it. Go place your head on the feet of a Khatrani, then you will realize what is the result of placing your head on someone's feet! Then your head will not remain attached to your neck.

Mulia not only rebels against prevalent and accepted norms, but also challenges the deeply caste hierarchical nature of sexualized violence. She is self-conscious, assertive, and strong-willed, and her protest is not against colonial but against upper-caste feudal sexual oppression. Anita Bharti, the celebrated Dalit feminist writer, posits that Premchand often wrote about Dalit women in a deeply sensitive manner. She remarks:

> If we compare Dalit [women] characters of Premchand with those depicted by many Dalit [male] authors, we will definitely find that Premchand's characters are much more vocal, argumentative, fearless, rebellious and ready to challenge Brahmanism . . . Like Ambedkar, Premchand too advocated *roti-beti* ties and inter-dining.
>
> (Bharti 2013: 107)

Sarah Beth in her analysis of Hindi Dalit male autobiographies argues:

> If we are to understand Dalit autobiographies to be representative life-stories of the Dalit community, then the 'We' meaning 'all Dalits' appears a decidedly masculine identity. Dalit women are, in fact, almost entirely absent from these texts.
>
> (Bharti 2013: 107)

One can go further, and say that Dalit patriarchy is apparent in much Dalit male writing, both explicitly and implicitly. Thus, some Dalit feminists publicly attacked the male Dalit writer Dharmvir for his patriarchal and sexist views, by flinging slippers at him (Bharti 2013; Brueck 2014: 56–7). While these literary figures show deep sensitivity on questions of caste and domination, there is a degree of indifference towards patriarchy, and they often reflect the template of subjugated womanhood. Because of this epistemic blind spot, their otherwise

perceptive responses are infected by a Dalit masculinist ethos and latent gender contradictions. One is not trying to compare or contrast the insights of Premchand on Dalit women with present-day Dalit male writers. Different times, locations, and contexts make this a futile exercise. Yet, such readings allow for a more nuanced analysis of Premchand, not bound by the rubric of glorification or demolition. They also make the debate on 'authenticity' – who can represent or write for whom? – more complicated. Premchand's stories with Dalit women characters give credence to the then-prevailing social tendency to turn the reformist gaze from the polluted to the suffering body. When placed in the context of canonized Hindi literature of the early 20th century, framed around Dalit bodies (largely male), he does appear to be doing something more. His stories reflect the mutable, fluctuating positions of his time, caught up, as reformers were, in a vortex of destabilizing changes. The interplay in his stories of complex emotions, values, and ideas about Dalit women defies any neat readings, and his contradictions can be delightfully interpreted in multiple ways. Studying the varied writings of Premchand, one passes through various alleys, cross-roads, by-lanes, and streets littered with gender and caste, reminding one of routes traversed and those not taken, and our inability to 'classify' or confine him in any definite slot. Premchand's ideas on gender, intermeshed with caste, appeared dated with the rise of caste radicals like Periyar and Ambedkar, but his quests were pertinent. We should be wary of easily dismissing 'philanthropy', 'care', 'open-mindedness', and other signs of liberal sympathy towards women, visible in the writings of some men. Rather, one can perhaps discern glimmers of proto-feminism in some of Premchand's works, which leave behind a legacy, a memory, something that stirs in the consciousness of the oppressed.

## Dalit male writings, 1857, and heroic women

In this section I examine some layers of Dalit male voices, conducive to writing new histories of Dalit women, and pointing to alternative resources for self-making. Normative constructions of Dalit women as either vamps or victims have found their nemesis in present-day Dalit Hindi popular literature, largely written by men and composed around 1857 Dalit *viranganas*. These male Dalit writings are littered with representations of positively militant Dalit women of 1857, which in many ways retract and transform Dalit female subjectivity. This recuperative move, while offering a multi-pronged

critique of caste in the public sphere, decodes 1857 through distinct and innovative meanings of gender. These transformed gendered representations work as critical metaphors, destabilizing conventional constructions of Dalit women. They convey complex messages, colluding with, and subverting, patriarchies. They throw up possibilities of a radical gendered Dalit politics, beyond the rubric of vamp or victim, or discursive frames of reform and nation, or even the tyrannies of 1857. While an exercise for Dalit claims to power, gendered Dalit politics of history writing can also partially aid in writing feminist histories of Dalits.

When it comes to women, the memory of 1857 is inevitably tied to that of Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, with celebrations of her valour rife in poetry, ballad, folktale, drama, school text books, and comics (Lebra-Chapman 1986). Popular Dalit histories, however, emphasize the participation of their own Dalit *viranganas*, foreshadowing Lakshmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal. Dalit female icons, engaged in radical armed struggles, far outnumber Dalit men in 1857, and remain significant in both Dalit pasts and their present identities. Women like Jhalkari Bai of the Kori caste, Uda Devi, a Pasi, Avanti Bai, a Lodhi, Mahabiri Devi, a Bhangi, and Asha Devi, a Gurjari, all stated to be involved in the 1857 revolt, have become the symbols of bravery of particular Dalit castes, and ultimately of all Dalits. To take the case of Jhalkari Bai, there has been a proliferation of popular tracts, including comics, poems, plays, novels, biographies, *nautanki*s, and even magazines and organizations in her name. To name a few, there is a comic *Jhalkari Bai*; poems titled *Virangana Jhalkari Bai Kavya*, *Jhansi ki Sherni: Virangana Jhalkari Bai ka Jeevan Charitra*, and *Virangana Jhalkari Bai Mahakavya*; plays and *nautanki*s called *Virangana Jhalkari Bai* and *Achhut Virangana Nautanki*; novels and biographies like *Virangana Jhalkari Bai* and *Achhut Virangana*; and a magazine called *Jhalkari Sandesh*, published from Agra ('Anu' 1993; Harit 1995; Naimishray 2003; Prasad 1987; Shakya 1999; Narayan 2006: 113–32). Dalit magazines have published articles on her (Sheelbodh 2005). Similarly, on Uda Devi, there are *khand kavya*s, stories, and magazines (Varma 2004: 15).

Representations of Dalit women as *viranganas* can be an important source of insight into gender politics from a Dalit perspective, and a site of struggle over meanings of 1857. While functioning as storytelling mechanisms, they are also symbols, struggling to impose definitions on what is and what should be, often reflective

of the hidden desires of the collective unconscious of Dalits. While highlighting the centrality of these women in the symbolic constitution of Dalit identity, this literature reveals a world turned upside down, and shows how resistance to dominant discourses about Dalit women has been coded and lived by Dalit communities at different historical moments. Dalit women *viranganas* emerge here as not only visible, but as conspicuous characters, and objects of adulation. These representations are open to simultaneously persuasive and competing readings, stretching the boundaries of both 1857, and images of Dalit women.

Challenging myths and histories surrounding Lakshmibai, for example, it is argued that she not only managed to escape to the forests of Nepal with the help of the ruler of Pratapgarh; she died only in 1915 at the age of 80. It is Jhalkari Bai who is the real martyr and *virangana*. It is her name that ought to be written in golden letters. Jhalkari Bai acquires a distinct moral edge over Lakshmibai, as she gave credence to the notion of sacrifice in a completely unselfish way. She was a Dalit woman, with no kingdom, no palace, no expensive jewellery, and no silken clothes. She was neither a queen nor the daughter of a feudal lord, nor the wife of a *jagirdar*. She fought selflessly, only for the love of her country, and thus her sacrifice far surpasses that of anyone else (Naimishray 1999: 136, 2003: 5; Dinkar 1990: 21–5). Dalits further argue that since their women did hard physical labour, their bodies were strong and well built, much more suited to fighting, while those of upper-caste women were frail and delicate, "getting a sprain by just breaking a cucumber" (Singh 2011: 269).

Amplification and admiration are hallmarks in these stories. These histories do not privilege individual self-fashioning; rather they produce a collective record of struggle through these women, as opposed to the interiority of the individual. Almost all histories of Dalit *viranganas* have male authors, catering in no small measure to masculinized political-public spaces. Very few Dalit women have penned these pamphlets. The gendered subaltern rarely speaks about herself in these histories, as the voices of Dalit *viranganas* remain faint discursive threads. It is Dalit male authors who provide narrative coherence, filling in the gaps and slipping into the present tense to add dramatic flourish to the stories. The written and visual images of these *viranganas* in the texts and on the covers of these pamphlets spectacularize them as clad in 'masculine' attire, with their bodies all covered up. In all of them, they are

experts in horse-riding, swimming, bow-arrow, and sword-fighting (Varma 2004: 23). Through them, an embattled Dalit masculinity is professing itself in the public-political sphere. Thus while there are female Dalit heroines, the leadership and the voice propagating their role is largely the voice of Dalit men.

It may be argued from a Dalit feminist perspective that the emergence of popular Dalit male literature on 1857 has not greatly altered the images of Dalit women. Though different in their scope, area, and portrayals, these presentations fail to offer a more intelligent and meaningful portrayal of them, guided as they are by an archetype of masculinist heroism. Save for who controls the representations, has anything much changed for Dalit woman? As bell hooks says, this may signify a mere transference, without radical transformation (hooks 1992: 126). It can be argued that a true laboratory potential can only be realized when Dalit women themselves can create and represent their own histories and images through a collage of identities and sing their own songs. At the same time, if we argue that representations of these Dalit *viranganas* are constructed only to support dominant modes of ideology, and that their aim is ultimately coercive, then how can this space be used also for confrontation? Does their representation also have the scope of carving out more contingent, varied, and flexible modes of resistances (Rajan 1993: 11, 129)? Can they provide oppositional perspectives about Dalit women and about the 1857 revolt? For example, in these stories, in the very act of speaking back, of mimicry, new interpretations and meanings are imparted. As Homi Bhabha remarks:

> To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. Then the words of the master become the state of hybridity – the war-like, subaltern sign of the native – then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain.
>
> (Bhabha 1994: 121)

Even the representation of Dalit *viranganas* on a high moral and heroic ground can be seen as an appropriation of respectability and 'credibility', imparting new meaning to Dalit participation in past histories. Moral codes have a completely different valance here.

Through such portrayals, Dalits hope to garner greater respect, opportunity, and dignity to these *viranganas*, and through them to all Dalit women and men. These can also be understood as attempts to counter the accusations of upper castes, to undermine caste prototypes of their inferiority, and to protest sexual exploitation of their women. Such portrayals thus acquire more layered meanings. They embody an inspiring picture, claiming to be centred on neglected Dalit women warriors of 1857, whose marginalization cannot be tolerated by Dalits any longer (Varma 2004: 5, 17). These Dalit *viranganas* not only carve Dalits into the nation, but also refuse narratives of humiliation. Here the subalterns are very much speaking, to inverse Spivak's proposition (Spivak 1988: 287–308), represented through Dalit women *viranganas*. As has been pointed out, "While Spivak is excellent on the 'itinerary of silencing' endured by the subaltern, particularly historically, there is little attention to the process by which the subaltern's 'coming to voice' might be achieved" (Moore-Gilbert 1998: 108).

The portrayal of Dalit *viranganas* also interrogates the typecasting of Dalit women as sexually deviant, loose, and unfaithful, and questions the putative relation between history and Dalit women. By shunning outward expressions of sexuality, Dalit women can also hope to build a space where they can wield more control over their bodies and gain dignity and respect within the dominant culture. In spite of limitations, it also dismantles the hegemonic stereotypes of Dalit women, either negatively as vamps, or as passive victims, powerless and subordinated, both of which deny Dalit women any agency of their own. Here, Dalit women are actors and agents in their own right, are active and armed, and are transformed from victims to victors within the context of a narrative. While penned by men, they can be appropriated by feminists as strategies of resistance. The readership encompasses all Dalits. Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Mahabiri Devi, and along with them many other Dalit women, emerge as physically commanding, infused with power, bravery, and sacrifice, locked in violent conflict with the British. The seeping of their narratives in militaristic feats and violence may also implicitly indicate the realities of Dalits that are marked by violence. Dalit women here are signifiers of Dalit identity. These are not just stories of brave Dalit women but of all Dalits, of their legacy, of their bravery, of their pride, and of their sacrifice in service of the nation.

These representations of Dalit women *viranganas* by Dalit men may thus also be seen as "positive engendering" (Dehejia 1997: 1–21), holding an appeal for Dalit women themselves. The centrality of Dalit *viranganas* in 1857 provokes reflection on the enabling potential for women's real lives of ubiquitous icons of Dalit feminine power. It urges Dalits to produce a more critical and self-reflexive account of 1857, reflecting the limits but also the potentialities of gendered Dalit readings. Rather than distilling hegemonic scripts from subversive ones, perhaps it would be more useful to see the lineages of these texts as not singular but layered and hybrid, posing hyphenated meanings of 1857 and Dalit women. While they may not be inherently radical or transformative, they represent dissident voices, coexisting with and simultaneously challenging dominant ideologies. The sex of the writer is often immaterial in these writings, as they are caught in a dialectics of collusion with and subversion of notions of nationalism, and patriarchal and caste conceptions of 1857 and Dalit women. There is no single coherent story here, also marking differences in Dalit perceptions. It is a diological process that stands at the border between disavowal and designation, rejection, and eulogy. The spaces of Dalits in 1857 are lived, deciphered, negotiated, and transformed repeatedly. They mark a third space, where the mutiny, along with Dalit women's imagery, is concurrently transformed and recouped, and its boundaries expanded and exploded. It is such spaces which have often led many to argue that Dalit movements have established solidarity between Dalit women and men much more than women's movements have between middle-class women and Dalit women.

## Conclusion

Writing, whether by women or men, by upper castes or Dalits, is often a performance, which can sometimes aid a strategic intersectionality between men and feminism. Male modes of narrating gendered bodies of Dalits or the gender of caste can at times both do and undo patriarchies. This essay has taken two disparate sites of reform and activism, and two modes of men's engagement with the 'women's question', to start a productive conversation between men and feminism, and to disaggregate and modify teleological narratives. I have underlined how both arenas are shaped by their varied contexts and historical times, where one case is tied to sympathy for the 'untouchables', while the other is intermeshed with a

broader politics of identity and dignity for Dalits. Yet, both engage with literary representations of Dalit women in a sensitive manner. I call them proto-feminist texts as they are not explicitly or overtly about feminism, and yet they have potential for being appropriated for the cause of feminisms and questioning normative definitions of feminism.

This collage of male voices and their constructions of Dalit women are stimulating because while they impose dominant norms and interests, they also undercut them. Casteism and patriarchy have difficulty with fluid identities and expressions which may carry hidden transcripts of resistance. These male writings can be a ground for counter-representations of Dalit women, hinting at instabilities and vulnerabilities in dominant inscriptions, sometimes subverting and disarming norms, and at times offering nuanced and new ways of imagining the gender of caste. These male voices are not overtly or explicitly feminist; they are often muted and hidden, but have distinct potentialities of throwing up other ways of reading and seeing the intersections between men and feminism. While patriarchy has reinvented itself in new ways, cracks and fissures in its edifice are discernible in some writings, whether by women or men.

Thus, some writings by men, even though surrounded by deep limitations, offer interesting possibilities for feminism. They do not simply show that men are important to gendered histories; they also challenge binaries that club all women with feminism and all men with masculinities and patriarchies. There are no easy equations here, and no domain where feminism necessarily or naturally belongs. The encompassing of queer politics, of sensitive men, of genders that cannot be categorized, opens up new ways of questioning power. Equally, as this essay attempts to show, writings by men can operate amidst complex registers which are heterogeneous, dynamic, and multiple. Premchand's stories, while at times strengthening gendered stereotypes, at others offer other possibilities. Dalit men, who are often 'disadvantaged' and sometimes inhabit a space of counter-maleness and counter-masculinity, can also at times occupy an arena of 'discursive feminism'. The male authors of the texts discussed in this chapter operate on very different templates, and have various problems and lacunae, but they have strains of proto-feminism as well, which often function in covert ways. Locating these writings in their historical contexts reveals that gender is itself constituted by, as well as constitutive of, a wide

set of social relations, while deeply intersecting with race, caste, class, religion, and nation. The dislodging of binaries can perhaps reveal that seeds of feminism (and patriarchy) emerge in different contexts in both women and men. The shafting of potential for feminism in some male writings is a productive way to go ahead. Even while deeply recognizing structures of power and hierarchy in which men have usually operated, perhaps it is time to also recast some men as feminists, or at least sensitive to gender.

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Chapter 12

# Feminism and the question of man

## Negotiating the (im)possible

*Anirban Das*

### Introduction

Can men do feminisms? The question, obviously, is not articulated well. In certain senses, men are seen to do feminisms empirically, rendering invalid the problem at a commonsensical level. A better way of asking is, in what sense can men do feminisms? The problem here is posed evidently at a structural level. Even if real men are seen to do feminism of a certain sort, the question does not limit itself to the complicated stories of that endeavour. The raising of the problem at a more abstract level is assumed to be legitimate. It becomes necessary, then, to begin by thinking about what makes this task (of doing feminism) difficult for men at that register. One needs to address the question of experience lived through struggles in gender politics without reducing the politics to the experience. The debates around the standpoint epistemologies become important at this juncture.

In a well-known enunciation of the predicament of feminist epistemologies, Elisabeth Grosz (2002) had spoken of the tensions implicit in the dual imperative of "being feminist" and "being theory". The explicit political 'bias' of the former has a fraught relationship with the 'neutral' universality of the latter. Is it possible to be biased and neutral at the same moment? One well-known response, whose genealogy can easily be traced to Marxian scholarship, is to assert that the only possible neutral gesture in a world biased for the dominant is to be biased – for the subjugated – against this bias. This imaginary rejoinder keeps unanswered the question of the need for the neutral. Is this need still there? Is the bias that is aimed at in the service of neutrality? Who can decide if this is so? How can one take this decision?

Any 'modern' form of knowledge has to negotiate between the universal aspiration of its substantive claims and the very situated particularities which define the boundaries of these claims. As in any other modern form of knowledge, the universal aspirations of feminist theory cannot remain blind to the particular enunciations which tend to fragment those objectives. Feminist epistemologies respond to these problems in multiple ways. In many of the contemporary discussions, the operative term through which this question has been addressed is 'contingency'. The necessity of remembering the contingent character of social identity has been underlined. Social theory, in trying to address the contingency of the 'social', has to work beyond the known boundaries of sociological and philosophical knowledge: this has been the implicit claim in the argument.

In this paper, I try to complicate the situation. What is it to think and work with the contingency of the social? To think of contingency, does one have to forego the universal? If not, and that again has been implicit in a nuanced form of argument, how does one account for that logically? One response has been to talk of the workability of knowledge, of context-sensitive theories of action. One cannot work with, cannot think, solely in terms of the contingent, the proposition runs. But that remains a pragmatic defence, not a logical response, I argue. I deal with attempts to address the problem of the contingency of workable yet generalizable knowledge. These are important because these address the problem at the epistemic level, not because they provide ready solutions. In the question of men doing feminisms, one cannot just point at the contextual making of the identities 'man' and 'woman'. Nor can one just assert that it is necessary to address the mechanisms of formation of these two identities in their general register as well as, simultaneously, remember the socially contingent forms which they take. The logical flow of one register to the other, which makes it necessary to address both at the same time, has to be established. For social theories, the import of my attempt is again in the need to address the impasse at the epistemic register. Not that this addressal is enough to solve the problem. Epistemic solution is not the bottom-line. As a point of fact, my own argument will try to bring in the co-implications of ontology with ethics and the questions around being and doing. The epistemic dimension is a necessary and not a sufficient condition of looking at the problem. This fact is something one often tends to forget in the rush to find easy

pragmatic solutions. In what ways do the ontology of 'man' negotiate the politics of feminism, is the question I thus try to address.

## The problem

It was 17 years ago, in 1999, when I wrote an essay that was published as 'In Search of a Feminist Theory for Men: The (Im)Possibility of (Wo)Man' in a small journal called *margins* (till then, later called *from the margins*). I had just begun my journey into the humanities, doing my MA a little late in life, and, with the support of a small group of caring, indulgent, and intensely critical friends, was busy bringing out the journal. A few even more indulgent senior people in the academia contributed to the journal, talked about it, criticized it, and took it seriously. But that is a different story. I followed this up with another essay in the following year 'In Search of the Feminist *Wo*man: The (Im)Possibility of *Being*' (2000). As Mary John pointed acutely out in her response to these essays, working through the thickets of conceptual debates around feminism in closely woven arguments, I could barely reach the question of *men*. Her query was, resonating somewhat with one of Stephen Heath's concerns in the essay (Heath 1987) canonical by now, "I cannot help wondering why it is that when men . . . want to speak as 'other', it takes the form of claiming/impersonating the 'feminine' rather than evolving a feminist politics for men" (John 2002: 247). For John, and more so for Indira Chowdhury (2000), who had earlier responded to the first essay, the problem lay in an overt taking of positions for abstract theoretical enunciations of the question as against a historically grounded context-sensitive dealing of the issue. We barely realized, at that moment, the generosity of this gesture from two leading feminists of our time in responding to almost unknown academic nobodies with all seriousness and energy. In hindsight, one does realize the limitations of one's articulations, the difficult formations of the essays that did not allow the question of man to appear except in a perfunctory manner. These were peculiar essays, declaring to search for a feminist politics for men and ending in discussing the difficulties of basing feminist politics on the identity of the woman. Do I, thereby, now think those two essays to be flawed in a fundamental way? The answer, as expected, will be complicated.

On second thought, trying to think of whether feminisms could be premised on the identity called 'woman' and in what does that identity then consist is not a problem much distant from the

question of men in feminism. The unthinking, or even certain nuanced versions of this, connection of the identity to the politics is premised on an authentication by the unmediated experiences of women, I suggested. And I tried to relate this to a dominant trend in feminist scholarship that repeats this forgetting of mediations in its celebration of historicization, even when the notion of history employed was discerning enough. For this trend, history becomes the only natural ground of mediation. To treat any category as a given ground of mediation is to treat that category as immediate and thus beyond interference. Doing thus is to forget that translations across immanent historicities let concepts work in abstract registers and these abstract transhistorical entities form equally legitimate grounds of mediation.

However, what I was trying to do then, in not very competent ways maybe, and what I still think to be necessary, is to maintain that for making a sense of men doing feminisms, one needs to address the question of what is feminism in the sense of questioning the identity on which feminism is based. It is not enough to question feminisms' ties to the identities of women and state both men and women can do feminism, or men can do feminism with more difficulty, or whether a man or a woman becomes a feminist depends on innumerable contextual factors. The direction of my inquiry was into questioning the surety of these identities between which feminism seemed to oscillate. Again, I tried to hold on to a tentativeness even in this questioning. Isn't it too easy and ready a solution to assert a multiplicity of sexual moments that get ideologically congealed to two binary ends of the man and the woman? Isn't there a need to hold on to the identity of the woman even when, maybe because, one is deconstructing its secure grounds? Speaking the language of the two, isn't it a little too simple to assert the dynamic of the many? Can one really get rid of the two just by an epistemic realization? Into the myriad contexts through which a man may or may not become feminist, is it then necessary to bring in the law of the inexorable two that continue to work across history, though only through history? Maybe, my essays failed to articulate these in clear terms. Yet they tenaciously held onto the predicament, refusing to come up with unambiguous solutions.

Here one may come up with a second point: the necessity of a production, through the text, of the difficulty of the situation. It is not simply a matter of a clear exposition of clear and present issues. Where the situation is complicated, for me, it is better to present that complication (albeit in as clear terms as possible) rather than make

it lucidly available to the reader as a simplified terrain. Well, this is a tired debate. The only point I want to stress upon is that it is still a debate, people are liable to take different, often opposing positions on this, and it would be stupidly arrogant to take for granted any one of the ends. It is as naïve to pretend that one can avoid the rigors of clear analysis by invoking complexities of the object of knowledge or of the processes of knowledge as it is to blithely assume that depth lies in simplicity and clarity. Empirical instances abound on both the sides. My point is, despite the brilliance and clarity of Heath's essay, there are other, more convoluted (and no less serious or obfuscatory on that count) ways to articulate the difficulty, bordering on the impossiblity, of men doing feminisms. The search for the meaning of feminism remains, is to remain, with the move to the impossible ends of these endeavours. The acts get defeated by their own selves if they are not marked indelibly by this inquiry.

So, how can men get inserted into the question of feminism and women?

## Feminist politics and the question of 'woman'

Who is the subject of feminism? Is the politics of feminism coupled to the identity of the 'woman'? The answer is not as easy as it seems. An easy disjuncture between the identity (woman) and the politics (feminism) would avoid the difficult problem of whether the identity has a privileged access to the politics. It is not a simple binary between opposing wholes (yes/no). If men can do feminism, do they have to work a little more? Does this 'more' depend on empirical situations of individuals? What are the structural elements that allow or hinder men to or from doing feminisms?

The construction of the identity of woman need not be intentional. Intention may or may not be a component of identity. The politics of feminism either presupposes an intention or a work (intentional or not) in changing the structure of phallogocentrism. When one thinks of (proto-feminist) women working before the birth of the category feminism, one is thinking along the latter meaning. I present a few telegraphic points on some elementary issues on thinking about the question of feminism and men.

1 Feminist thought and gender theory are two different and intersecting sets.
2 If conceived within the binary axis of ethico-politics and epistemo-ontology, feminist thought focuses on the former

while gender theory has its focus on the latter. Though none of these wholly precludes any of the two dimensions.

3 Ethico-politics and epistemo-ontology are dimensions of *structurality* that involve *thinking*. The binary opposite to this is the *immanence* of *being*.

3.i When 'history' is spoken of in critical theory, the two senses of *structurality* and *immanence* remain intertwined in it.

3.ii When 'history' is posited against 'History', the latter is thought to be effacing *immanence* with *structure*.

4 One stream of the critiques of abstract reason and knowing (science critiques, feminists, postcolonial theorists, more or less known under the blanket term of postmodernism) tries to problematize both the binaries of ethico-politics/epistemo-ontology and immanence/structure. As such, this stream views the knowledge of a concept to be inalienable from ethicopolitical considerations in the context of knowing the concept as well as from the immanence of the referent to that concept.

4.i In the phrasing of the above sentence, the dichotomy of concept/referent was alluded to. This allusion points at the impossibility of uttering anything wholly beyond the play of binaries.

4.ii The said stream of theorizing tries to write this impossibility into its enunciations.

5 Writing about 'man' involves writing in three different yet overdetermined registers simultaneously – (a) the definition of 'man' in the structure of gendering: its epistemo-ontology; (b) the implications of this definition for the 'woman', for the 'man', and the way 'man' is to be viewed at by feminism, the three together constituting its ethico-politics; (c) the multiple elements that go on to constitute the immanent processes of being a man in a specific situation/location.

6 Treating the three registers to be overdetermined implies the impossibility of writing about the gendering of man in an abstract universality without referring to the location of its enunciation at a specific site and political space. Simultaneously, this implies the impossibility of writing about man in a specific context without referring to the universal structures of gendering with all their complexities. The complexities include

> the problem of working through the two-ness and the multiplicity of sexualities and sexes. Other identity categories like class, caste, race, nation, etc. are also implicated in the processes. The reference to these will depend on the focus of the inquiry in question.

The standpoint theories form a very important strand of feminist epistemology that tries to make sense of the question of the subject of feminism. That the answers from within the standpoint theories are not very simple is evident from the discussion on the distinction between the feminist standpoint and the woman's standpoint. In the former, the political positioning of the observer/knower is focused upon. In the latter, the ontology of the woman is the more important element. The question becomes, how can one define the role of the man as a participant in feminism when feminism is defined in terms of the feminist or the woman's standpoint? The problem becomes more complicated if feminism and the category of 'woman' are seen to be in a relationship which is necessary yet tangential (not a one-to-one relation).

The complexity of the situation increases when one thinks of the links between the structural features of feminism or 'woman' with the immanent becomings of phenomenal women (working for the moment with a phenomenal/imaginary binary). The standpoint of the oppressed gets its ultimate definition through the experience (be that of being, of becoming, or of struggle) of the oppressed. Experience, when viewed to be accessible without mediation, repeats the mediation of the hegemonic. Experience, when viewed as being mediated through language or history, becomes amenable to authentications from linguistic or historical grounds. One may subscribe to an attempt to come out of the duality of the question – is experience an *immediate* presence or is it *mediated* by discourses and histories? An answer that gravitates to a focus on mediations is open to the charges of an easy solution of unexamined culturalism. This position shifts its attention to the cultural construction of experience, builds systemic structures based on the elements under scrutiny at the moment of the particular theoretical enunciation, and rests assured about the inevitable exclusions perpetrated on other elements (not deemed 'relevant' to the particular discussion in question), complacent with the inevitability of choosing a moment to start. On the other hand, the element of the unanticipatable

remains untheorized, not taken cognizance of within the blanket term of immediacy.

In the canonical book on *Men in Feminism* (Jardine and Smith 1987), the text published under the proper name Jacques Derrida is an authorized transcript of an interview with Derrida ('Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida'). The prefatory footnote to this article says:

> it gives a good sense of how Derrida negotiates the difficult question which feminists inevitably will have about the treatment of "the feminine" in his work. It is perhaps worth remarking that in the original (i.e., unedited) transcripts Derrida often makes comments in the first person about his own relation to such questions. Those comments would have considerably affected the tone of the seminar, but we are not "authorized" to publish them.
>
> (189)

I bring this footnote into the main body of my discussion as a marker of a certain caution, if not unease, that the 'man' has to practice or to observe in his negotiations with feminism. The 'special' part he has to partake of in being feminist. My own experience of more than a decade in feminist academia is on the whole of a generous acceptance. The skepticism and covert hostility have come predominantly from male colleagues, most often in the form of suave personal half-articulated remarks. The content of these comments hinted at purported privileges of doing 'marketable' scholarship where feminism 'sells' more than their own 'pure' historical research or 'real' philosophy. That one can argue, theoretically, that 'philosophy' or 'history' or 'sociology' worth its name has to be feminist in an internal and intrinsic sense is beyond the imaginations of the producers of these 'high' scholarship. Feminisms, rather 'women's issues' for them, are add-on garnishing to the real thing.

On the part of 'women's studies', one can now tentatively raise the issue of a cautious and hardly articulated move of treating the 'man' in feminism as an exotic exception, even in the gesture of acceptance. It is understandable that the man must be ready to accept a certain atmosphere of mild doubt across the divisions of experience and struggle, across an ontico-ontological divide that separates the sexes. The question that remains is whether this hint of an incommensurability is also a hardening of that separation.

Derrida's text grapples with this problem, tries to unwind it through an act of division between sexual opposition and sexual difference and ends with a gesture towards the impossibility of such separation and the necessity of doing it. For him, "[o]pposition is two, opposition is man/woman. Difference on the other hand, can be infinite number of sexes" (198). Women's studies, to be not reducible to the beehive, have to address if not come out of this problem. The unanticipatability that haunts the fixity of the power-laden field of sexual identities has to be attended to even when working within that very field.

But do all these seemingly vague and abstract ruminations on the contingency or stability of the subject have any bearing on the problem at hand? On the question of, how, in a structural sense, can men do feminisms? From our discussions so far, I will again, in the form of a discrete line of unadorned arguments, present my position. Before that, one self defence. Is it at all necessary to pose this question at the level of logic? Is it not perfectly superfluous to the discussions of men doing feminisms and their very real predicament accessible through concrete studies in history or ethnography? My point is, without this query into the (im)possibility of feminisms for men, the question of feminism and the question of men both remain at a commonsensical level, leaving the problem of their connection as a problem of simple addition. To some men, feminism can be added as an additional attribute depending on the specific contexts of their work. For some moments in feminism, men can be added as compatriots, friends, or allies. What makes this addition possible is the question I raise.

The definition of 'man' retains a supplementary excess that lets it work against itself. Two points are to be noted. One, this excess does not flow from the empirical differences in men's positions, though these differences are operative in case of empirical men doing feminisms. The fundamental instability in identities is what lets de-sexing (in the sense of a 'declassing') at the level of logical possibility. Two, the supplement does not guarantee transgressions. It keeps open the possibilities of transgression. Overdeterminations of contexts and intentions let the possibilities move in unanticipatable ways to myriad directions. The definition of feminism also exceeds woman. This excess is not reducible to, though constituted largely by, the processes named as gendering. These processes, that produce the meanings of the man and the woman out of innumerable profusion of possibilities, are overdetermined and inexorably

marked by the logic of two-ness. Supplements to the meanings thus produced, potentially dangerous, lend feminisms the possibilities to incorporate the supplements to the name of man. There still remains the differential between the two names, man and woman, to their accesses to the politics of feminism.

If men do feminisms, they do not do the same feminisms as women. The difference is not in the order of an opposition. It is in the scale of a slippage, a discernible yet simmering distinction.

## Of men and women: memories

If men may access feminisms of a certain kind, the way in would likely be marked by guilt if not reparation. One's position in a field structured hierarchically as a pre-given 'fact' lets him enjoy privileges and power over the 'women' even if he does not actively pursue the position. The guilt that one thus gets inscribed by is structural and not dependent upon his intentions or actions. Even active refusal to access one's privileges leaves residual effects of the hierarchy that marks one as the dominant. A not-so-thin line of demarcation separates the powerful who declines his benefits and the abject who does not have access to those.

Thus the guilt of the 'man' may also be of many shades. At one end of the spectrum is the assimilated guilt of magnanimous compassion. This guilt, in its formal completion, fulfils and secures the subject in its ambition to wholeness. The guilt is the pathway of entry into the domain of the woman. The dominant, in his expanded subject-hood, thus gains access to the predicaments of women. Nothing remains impervious to this man's realm of understanding and influence. This guilt is the way in to the forgetting of culpability. It remains as the reminder of one's own generosity.

At the other end of the spectrum would be the remorseless, unforgiving guilt that rents the subject-hood of man. The relentless memory of one's participation in the structure of phallogocentrism, intentional or not. To bear the marks of what one has done, done to the woman, to the possibilities one tore away from the mother, the friend, the wife, or the daughter. Feminisms for men are marks of this guilt, the non-forgetting of structures and events that make one the 'man'. Out of a few rare instances of such unyielding rememberings, I follow one literary example.

The young narrator of *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1998) stays in "a housing estate outside the town of Worcester" in

South Africa. The boy, as he carries on with the life in the provincial town, sorely misses his earlier life in Cape Town, only 90 miles away yet better in all respects.

> "His mother is restless too. I wish I had a horse, she says. Then at least I could go riding in the veld. A horse! says his father: Do you want to be Lady Godiva?
>
> She does not buy a horse. Instead, without warning, she buys a bicycle, a woman's model, second-hand, painted black. . .
>
> She does not know how to ride a bicycle; perhaps she does not know how to ride a horse either. She bought the bicycle thinking that riding it would be a simple matter. Now she can find no one to teach her.
>
> His father cannot hide his glee. Women do not ride bicycles, he says. His mother remains defiant. I will not be a prisoner in this house, she says. I will be free."

To begin with, the boy welcomed the idea that his mother would have a bicycle. He imagined himself riding the bicycle with his brother and mother down 'Poplar Avenue', the road that went out from their home. But finally he vacillated. As his mother continued to face the daily rebukes from the father with a dogged silence, the boy thought maybe women are not really to ride bicycles. He wondered if indeed the father was right. Otherwise why would they find no other woman in the locality who could teach the mother to ride?

> "Alone in the back yard, his mother tries to teach herself. Holding her legs out straight on either side, she rolls down the incline towards the chicken-run. The bicycle tips over and comes to a stop. Because it does not have a crossbar, she does not fall, merely staggers about in a silly way, clutching the handlebars.
>
> His heart turns against her. That evening he joins in with his father's jeering. He is well aware what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone."

At some point of time, she ultimately learns to ride the bicycle. Yet, her manner of riding was unsure, shaky, as she tried heavily to turn the metallic shaft.

In the mornings, mostly when he has gone to school, his mother goes on to Worcester on her bicycle, her only adventure. Once he sees her coming towards the house down Poplar Avenue. In a white

blouse and dark skirt, her hair streaming in the wind, she looked much younger, "like a girl, young and fresh and mysterious". And the father continued to make jokes whenever he saw the bicycle in its place, lying at an angle with the wall. In these jokes, whenever the bicycle, with the woman riding it with evident effort, went past the people of Worcester, they would stop their work, stand, and stare at the sight. They would mock at her hard work. These jokes were not really funny. Yet, his father and the boy together laughed remembering them. The mother, who, according to the boy, was "not gifted that way", barely responded. She had no response but a laconic reply asking them to laugh if they liked.

One day, of no particular accord, she stopped riding the bicycle. She did not explain anything. Within a few days, the bicycle disappeared.

> "No one says a word, but he knows she has been defeated, put in her place, and knows that he must bear part of the blame. I will make it up to her one day, he promises himself.
>
> The memory of his mother on her bicycle does not leave him. She pedals away up Poplar Avenue, escaping from him, escaping towards her own desire. He does not want her to go. He does not want her to have a desire of her own. He wants her always to be in the house, waiting for him when he comes home. He does not often gang up with his father against her: his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father. But in this case he belongs with the men." (2–4)

The minimalist, stark non-description of the prose follows the boy's memory with a fact-like unattached cruelty. The adjectives I hereby use probably do disservice to the effects the prose produces. Analysis, even of an understanding kind, is not enough to describe the affect. The simplicity of the sympathy of the boy for the woman – a sympathy that the mature man might lose – the limits of this unexamined spontaneity when it faces the pulls of ideological machinations in their everydayness, and the gossamer-thin yet ineradicable traces of that lost impulse inscribe the text with a rare clarity. This probably is an instance where literature marks – in its own feminist ethicopolitical gesture – the itineraries of the different yet continuous movements, for a man, from inchoate feminist impulses to a feminist politics.

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# Afterword: an awkward relationship: men and feminism

*Anupama Rao*

In a famous essay published 40 years ago, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern argued that although feminism promised to revolutionize the disciplines, feminism's desire for recognition from the mainstream stood in an uneasy relationship with the desire for autonomy, which was reflected in the institution of women's studies as a discipline configured around the sex–gender problematic, or the 'woman question'. Strathern noted that anthropology, a discipline that best resembled feminist inquiry because both placed "experience" and "difference" at the core of their concerns, exemplified her concerns about the discordance between (feminist) theory, and disciplinarity. She noted:

> Feminist inquiry suggests that it is possible to discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the Other . . . Anthropological inquiry suggests that the self can be consciously used as a vehicle for representing an Other. But this is only possible if the self breaks with its own past. These [feminism, anthropology] thus emerge as two very different radicalisms. For all their parallel interests, the two practices are differently structured in the way they organize knowledge and draw boundaries, in short, in terms of the social relations that define their scholarly communities.[1]

Strathern's focus was on the status of 'experience' for feminism, and for anthropology: in the case of feminism, experience was the grounds for radical subjectivity, while the anthropologist's experience of alterity, or the recognition of difference, was predicated on an ethics of respect and responsibility to the Other. At the risk of simplifying, one could argue that if the tension between identity

and difference also indexed an enduring power differential, feminism's future lay in a project of equality and the transcendence of patriarchy. Meanwhile, anthropology was firmly committed to its belief in the social worth of diverse persons and plural cultures. Strathern's point was thus an important one: politics could not be separated from methodology, while methods were shaped by disciplinary formation. (The essays in this volume by Kumar, Rao, and Sircar consider similar issues.)

One could extend Strathern's argument about the incommensurability of feminism and discipline – and the productive tension she posits between two broadly different conceptions of politics and personhood – to the concerns of the current volume. We could then ask whether the relationship of men to feminism is predicated on a similar *incommensurability* between the putative subject of feminist politics, who is assumed to be gendered female, and the impossibility of men occupying that position. Indeed this question recurs throughout the volume with the individual essays interpreting and then resolving the dilemma differently, thus making for an active sense of debate and discussion among the volume's contributors.

Some essays ask whether the question of men and feminism is ultimately a question about the possibility of solidarity across difference. (Kulkarni, Al Baset and Chowdhury, Srivastava, V Geetha) Others ask whether staging the question of men and feminism brings feminism itself to crisis; whether this points to an impasse, or a 'lack of fit' between the open-ended imagination of feminist futurity, on the one hand, and the political subject who enacts feminism's desire on the other. (Basu, Tellis) If feminist inquiry is organized around the analytic of sexual difference, and sexual difference is understood to constitute 'the social', what are the stakes of a volume such as this, which articulates a range of positions with regard to the question of whether (and how) men might inhabit the politics of feminism? Do men need to become feminists if the full promise of (feminist) equality is to be achieved? Or, must they mark their difference from, yet intimacy with, feminism's imaginary: must men perform the impossibility of identity in the name of solidarity and friendship? And where, indeed, does this leave competing inequalities – e.g. class, caste, religion, region, queer sexuality – which have provoked recurrent crises for South Asian feminisms? Here we might want to think about intersectionality less as a mode of analysis than a method for illuminating *gender as trouble*, to repurpose Judith Butler's felicitous phrase.[2] That is,

might we want to consider intersectional analysis as a necessary yet insufficient framework for an analytics that stages the fraught relation of men to feminism?

The essays in this volume adopt a range of methods, and explore diverse archives to think through questions of ethics and experience, witness, and intimacy. And they approach the question of men and feminism from numerous points of view – the autobiographical (which predominates in many essays), to history, literature, and political commentary. Most argue from the perspective of a politics of the present, and they assume feminism as a real force in the world both as a political project and a distinctive mode of inquiry.

Indeed the essays are united in their address to Indian feminism, the intimate agon of the volume. The volume's essays mark the 'difference' of Indian feminism from its North Atlantic variants. However, they simultaneously challenge Indian feminism's inability to address the many forms of inequality and difference that structures the sex–gender system, and they notate feminism's pronounced investment in heteronormativity. If sexual difference is what organizes the theory and praxis of feminism, this volume challenges both the adequacy and the abstraction of that term. Instead its authors focus on the legibility of bodies, while remaining alert to the range of projects that might fall under the rubric of a politics of intimacy; intimacy not merely as a means to build solidarity, but as a term that refers to betrayal, repulsion, and even failure as active terms in feminism's (recent) political history.

In the rest of this Afterword, I briefly pick up on three important themes – sexuality, social difference, and ethics, raised by *Men and Feminism in India*.

1. The sense of crisis and possibility announced by this volume also leads us to ask whether our current political conjuncture is marked by a great divergence between politics organized around sexual versus social difference. That is, whether the project of queering sex and challenging hetero-patriarchy stands in some tension with the many forms of 'difference feminism' that assume the realism (and relevance) of social categories such as caste, class, and religion, and their ongoing impact on women. Here sexuality and gender appear to be terms in opposition, rather than terms that complement, or supplement, each other. This is brought up especially sharply in the letter from Forum Against Oppression of Women that was sent to AIDWA/NFIW in 2001 to protest the latter's decision to refuse lesbian groups a request to march with their banners on

International Women's Day that year. The arguments that AIDWA/NFIW offered in support of their decision framed lesbian identity as a matter of individual choice, and indicated that lesbian rights were not as important as protecting women from class-based and Hindu-majoritarian violence. At one point the FAOW letter notes, "Then maybe, you have yet to acknowledge that women are sexual beings . . . [and] acknowledge the claims of those who choose an identity based on their sexuality rather than an oppression" (Tellis, this volume, Chapter 8).

The impasse that is staged here between desire and oppression, between a chosen politics of the self and inscription into the social order as an oppressed, or violated, subject speaks to the unmooring of sexuality from gender. If this is the challenge that LGBTQ politics poses for Indian feminism, it is not easily resolved considering the internal tension between the identities, or performances of self, that are contained under the rubric of LGBTQ organizing. It is at this site, perhaps, that the contrast between politics organized around (sexual) difference confronts the universalizing impetus of struggles for (social) equality in a pressing and visible manner. Can a politics of respect, recognition, and equal right – animated by liberal conceptions of personhood – coexist with a more conflictual understanding of society where sexual difference and proscribed desire (i.e. the incest taboo) – drawing on psychoanalytic theories for sexual identification – govern the legibility of the social? How does the desire for equality and inclusion find common ground with a performative politics of queer disruption?

2. The volume's concerns are robustly presentist, and the past is not of explicit concern to most of the volume's contributors. However, there are occasional references to sexuality's subcontinental history, and to scholarly arguments about a more 'open' past, or a time when practice was not yet associated with personal identity. Of course a good deal of queer activism across South Asia has challenged the Foucauldian commonsense which associates sexuality with identity by arguing that this model of sexual normalization is Eurocentric and incomplete. Whether they hew to nostalgic reconstructions of premodern sexualities or address 'third sex', or *hijra*, politics, some of these arguments assume a time before colonization. Or else they adduce the persistence of social formations untouched by the global regulation of gender and sexuality. A more powerful response would address the relevance of community as an organizing rubric for understanding the emergence of

'gender' and 'sexuality'. Asking how 'caste' and 'religion', that is, collective formations, shape the legibility of gender and sexuality also forces us to challenge the association of sexuality with models of individuation.

This volume makes reference to a mythopoetics of the past where the lives of the dalitbahujan castes provide a vision of human possibility, especially around the politics of gender. V Geetha's essay on the writer and literary critic Raj Gauthaman underscores his interest in mining the corpus of classical Tamil literature to recover women's sensual, passionate engagement with the social world. Gauthaman's reading stands in radical contrast to contemporary Dalit and/or feminist readings of the caste–gender nexus as a space of historic violation. This latter position is addressed by Charu Gupta in her essay on the subject positions available to those who adopt the mode of social realism to depict the gendering of caste, whether Hindu reformist writers such as Premchand or male Dalit writers. In either case, an engagement with alternative life worlds is precluded either by upper-caste liberal guilt or (Dalit) men's investment in Dalit patriarchy.

3. Let me pick up another aspect of Gauthaman's writings, his interest in writing a psychobiography of caste through a genealogy of (caste) ethics. The ethical question is at the heart of how men relate to feminism. It is clear that a critical feminism must address the troubled history of its own emergence, while remaining attentive to new forms of friendship and solidarity that can enlarge the domain of feminist politics. Is it possible that we will think less about the relationship of men to feminism and more about feminism's relationship to men as a response to our current conjuncture? Let me explain.

Recall the difficult contrasts between caste, class, and gender that arose in the context of the 2012 Delhi rape. The brutality of the gang rape drew attention to neoliberal transformations in urban public culture, especially the new forms of desire and consumption that have altered traditional status hierarchies even as they have provoked new strategies of exclusion and enclaving. The redefinition of the 'public' that has occurred in the wake of seismic shifts in the political economy of caste and its relationship to landed capital in particular has had deep impact on lower-caste masculinity. The Delhi gang rape thus staged a conflict between a gendered politics of presence, on the one hand, and male bodies marked by the vulnerabilities of caste and class on the other. Demands for corporal

punishment ironically affirmed the state's right to kill in order to protect women, and thus placed feminists in the impossible position of choosing between two kinds of violence: the violence of the state versus community. That public sociality (between men and women, between people from different castes and classes, and between different ways of occupying public space) has been reduced to a violent encounter between the vulnerabilities of gender on the one side, and caste–class dispossession on the other, poses fundamental questions about the discordance between the temporalities of gendered subject formation, on the one hand, and transformations of political economy on the other.

Indeed, precarious livelihood and social life need to be thought together if one is to make sense of how state practices are actively aiding the production of male vulnerability. Teaching and writing in the United States as I do makes it impossible to ignore the mass incarceration of African American men – their exclusion from the labor force and their absence from economies of care to which we give the name 'family'. Indeed abolition feminism is predicated on the argument that the mass incarceration of men is a key feminist issue. Similarly, the War on Terror has produced a global discourse about the Muslim as terrorist, and rendered the bodies of Muslim men available to state violence, including torture and death.[3] A feminist response to these struggles is awkward, but it is also urgent since it requires thinking historically about the relationship between bodies and the state, and between subjection and sexuality, and their impact on current socio-economic processes (securitization, speculation) which exacerbate the vulnerability of subaltern communities, especially their men.

Feminism's relationship to men is not merely the flip side, or the negative image of men's relationship to feminism, however. Rather, the question would be how we mobilize the lessons learned about the fluid and unstable subject of feminism's address in order to rethink a politics of the human. We are increasingly witnessing protests – from the Black Lives Matter movement, to the Azadi Kooch march led by Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch leader Jignesh Mewani one year after the infamous flogging of seven Dalits in Una (Gujarat), and the recent #NotInMyName protests that erupted across Indian cities to protest Muslim lynchings – against the ongoing dehumanization of entire communities. While this is not immediately a feminist issue as it is typically understood, I propose that all of these struggles pose key questions about the relationship between

'gender' and 'the human'. I would like to think that the complex issues of desire, equality, and solidarity that the essays in this volume address also provide inspiration for arguing that feminism is nothing if it is not an ethical response to the human condition.

## Notes

1 Marilyn Strathern (1987): "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs*, Vol 12, No 2, p 289.
2 Nivedita Menon (2015): "Is Feminism About Women? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol L, No 17.
3 See e.g. work of Jasbir K. Puar (2007): *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.