Feminism: Concepts and Theories
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Feminism in India: Trajectory and Concerns - Part 01

Professor Mathangi Krishnamurthy: Good afternoon, all. Thank you for being here. It is with great pleasure that I have invited Doctor Kalpana Karunakaran to do a guest lecture for Feminism Concepts and Theories. Doctor Kalpana, as you all well aware, is a wonderful teacher and a fantastic sort of interlocutor for questions of feminism in India and questions of development and feminism. She teaches various classes in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences on these very questions. I encourage you to take these classes. So it is fortunate that we have her here today for a two hour session on The Question of Feminism in India. Until now, we have been discussing Feminism Concepts and Theories. Broadly, we have seen what are the principles through which we understand gender, through the ways in which we analyse gender in relation to happenings in the world, but also to the development of theory in general. Since, as of last week, we have started moving into questions of practice and praxis.

So today, over the next two hours, we are going to try and understand how to imagine any of these theories and concepts in relation to the particular happenings on our subcontinent and in relation to the history of the Indian National State. Doctor Kalpana has a PhD from the Madras Institute of Development Studies and her work has broadly been in questions of women, poverty, and micro-finance. And her book on the same was published by Routledge in 2017. So please join me in giving Kalpana a very warm welcome.

Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran: Thank you Matangi for that glowing introduction. I will try my best to live up to the promise of that. So let me begin by saying, yes, echoing what she said, which is that if you have questions or something was not quite clear, I would be grateful if you would note it, that down and about 10 minutes before break time I will open it up for questions just so that I get a continuous flow going.

Okay, so, I am going to be talking to you about Indian women's movements and the manner in which they have absorbed and placed before us the question of feminisms in India. If you note, I say Indian women's movements in the plural and feminisms in the plural. In fact, the

Indian women's movements have been extremely open to asking themselves the question of whether there can be anything called The Women's Movement in the singular at all. Given that India is a country with so many hierarchies and divisions, can there be one stream of the women's movement that can claim to speak for all of it, for all of its rich multi-hued experiences? Clearly not! Right? And also the question of how inclusive have some of the more major strands and streams of the women's movements have been? That question has also been raised in an introspective mode by key thinkers, leaders and organisers within the Indian women's movements.

So I am going to begin also by placing this before you as well as the caveat that clearly even given two 50 minutes slots, I am not going to be able to do justice to all that can actually be encompassed by the term Indian feminisms or Indian women's movements. There will be exclusions; I beg to be forgiven for that. I will, what I will try to do is to sort of convey a sense of the major debates, the major discussions, the major experiences and questions raised by some of the Indian women's movements before you in the time that I have today.

And I also want to make it clear that I will not be starting in the period that we know as the pre-independence period. So I will not be talking about the organisations or the modes of thought with respect to the women's question that emerged during the period of the national struggle in India. I am going to begin very much in post-independence India. This is also in the interest of making it manageable given time and other constraints. It is not to give you the sense that nothing happened before 1947.

So let us, let me begin by asking the question of when does the articulation of the women's question in India actually, in post-independence India begin. Generally, the consensus is that this begins from the early 1970s to the period of the mid-1970s. And who were the key thinkers, actors, organisers during this period? They were women who belonged to a broad spectrum of groups and movements. They worked closely with trade union movements, with youth movements, with students' movements, broadly left and socialist movements, some of them independent.

What was the impetus? What was the motivation? What inspired these women to act as they did? It was, of course, the context of the times. There was also simultaneously the women's movements in the west, feminist movements in the west that I am sure you have addressed in the context of your course and ideas travel across national boundaries. For many of the

women acting within India, it was also their faith in Marxism and its vision of emancipation for all! Not only for men, but emancipation for all!

The women were also inspired by Asian and African National Liberation struggles of that period and the images of women from those struggles, women carrying guns who left their homes and families to fight on behalf of the people, to mobilise in the countryside. So that was also then, in the context of that time, those heroic images were also like a call for action, a call towards action.

And there was also the social realities of India of the late 1960s, early 1970s onwards. Price rise, soaring prices, rising unemployment, corruption in governance and a very clearly evident ongoing exploitation of the peasantry, of the tribal poor, which did not seem to have been resolved after 1947. So the contradictions of Indian society of this period were also very clearly a motivating factor and in 1977, and you know the year ’77 is important because the emergency ends during that period, right? the national emergency between ’75 and ’77. So ’77 is when the emergency ends. A lot of groups that were forced to go underground, oppositional groups, surface, women's groups among them, and they begin to organise and to act. During this period, there were three… (I must begin also by saying that the period of the 70s were also marked by the coming together of a lot of women's organisations on two concerted campaigns having to do with rape, and with dowry and dowry deaths. So essentially violence against women, both in public places and violence within the home). There were three incidents that propelled rape on to the national arena of debate and discussion. There were incidents that involved three women, Rameeza Bee, Maya Tyagi and Mathura. And I am only going to focus on Mathura, but of course, I would ask you to when whenever you have time to Google, to look up the stories of Rameeza Bee, what happened to her? What followed after that? What happened in the case of Maya Tyagi?

But Mathura was a 16 year old tribal girl in Maharashtra. She had eloped with her boyfriend. When her brother and father reported this to the police that their girl had gone missing, probably eloped with her boyfriend, Mathura was raped in the toilet behind the police station by policemen in uniform, policemen with her family waiting outside. When the case of Mathura and Mathura was also a courageous young woman who pursued the case; who did not give up. So when Mathura’s rape case was heard at the High Court, the High Court convicted the policemen, and in a surprising turn of events, when the case reached the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court acquitted the policeman. It overturned conviction by the

High Court. And the Supreme Court in its judgement made a couple of statements that were found appalling -- that we would now recognise as appalling. For instance, it said that “She was a willing party.” So this was in justification of why it did not convict the policemen, why did not find them guilty of rape. It said that “She was a willing party as she had not put up resistance.” She had not offered stiff resistance, because there were no visible marks of injury on her person, on her body. And also because this is from the judgement, “because she was used to sex, she might have incited the policemen to have intercourse with her.”

So when the Supreme Court's judgement was made public and made known, four lawyers wrote an open letter addressing the Supreme Court, honourable judges of the Supreme Court. The letter was obviously released to the media and to the public at large. And this letter became a call for action, a rallying cry because in the letter, what they point out is that it is rape law and the judicial bias that is at fault and have let Mathura down. So they make the point that must seem obvious to us now, that the woman has been judged even before the case was tried. And Mathura’s case was just one case, so obviously they used the Mathura case to talk about how rape trials are conducted in court. What is routine procedure? Right? So, she is tried, she is judged before the case is tried. In this case, she was found and declared a woman of easy virtue as she had premarital sex with her boyfriend. And what happens in this case, as they rightly point out, is that the burden of proof has been shifted on to Mathura, that she had not consented, rather than, so Mathura was the rape victim here, rather than the accused, the policeman, that they had not raped her. So shifting the burden of proof as well.

And, the previous sexual history of the woman, the survivor, the victim, is discussed threadbare in such cases, and that is used to decide whether a particular woman has actually been violated, or not. So, in fact, the word they use is, they say the previous sexual history of the victim decides, determines the rapeability of the victim of the woman; can she even be raped at all? So evidently, if she is a woman of easy virtue then it is not possible to rape her.

So I do not have to tell you, right? all of you now you have heard of course. In this case you will also hear the echoes of the good victim, bad victim trope that I am sure that you are all familiar with from following more recent cases. Right? So, but this is something that is the sort of becomes a trigger for action, and women's groups the letter is circulated widely. It galvanises nationwide action on the part of these newly emergent women's groups.

In the year 1980, on International Women's Day, March 8th, women's groups in numerous cities come together, stage protests, demonstrations and public action asking for another trial,

another hearing in Mathura's case. So this also then becomes a moment really, it opens up the space and the moment for several women's groups to debate and discuss the way in which rape trials are conducted within their forums, to write about it, to talk about it, to place it forward before public consciousness. And women's groups come to be formed in this context in about seven metro cities: Delhi, Chennai, now Madras then, Patna, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Mumbai, these are cities in which groups are being formed. Women are coming together. The Mathura case, as with the other cases that I have asked you to look up on, Maya Tyagi, Rameeza Bee and any other cases provide the context really for that action. Right?

And during this period, I also want to add that women's responses take one cogent shape. We are able to make a very clear case that there must be a reform in rape laws because the change, the existing law then had not been changed for about a 150 years. So they make a number of demands that are then, that becomes the basis for amendments to the law. So you have Parliament passing the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1983, which does several things: it shifts the onus of proof away from the victim and on to the accused; it says there must mandatory punishment of 10 years imprisonment; it defines the category of custodial rape, which you must know is rape in custody, when you are in custody of the state -- the police station rape was clearly a custodial, what we define as a custodial rape, right? It asks for in-camera trials.

So in some ways, the fact that the amendment to the law passed by Parliament had taken into account some, perhaps not all, but many of the demands placed by women's groups and pushed by the struggles of women's groups on the field on to the public agenda and the national consciousness. That was like an early victory for women's movements in the country, suggesting and heralding a politics of the possible. What it was possible to do to push the state to do when women act and organise? Right? So this is in the, with reference to rape and sexual violence.

Dowry, this was also a period when women's groups, the newly formed women's groups began to intervene directly in a large number of dowry cases where they found there was this mysterious pattern: the stove would burst when a young bride was cooking and she would die of severe burns. But it somehow mysteriously it would burst only when she was cooking not when anybody else from the family was in the kitchen. So it was almost as if only she was prone to have these accidents in the kitchen. So there was a pattern. So what they did was to establish that there was a pattern, that it was sinister that it was in fact systemic. It was no

suicide. Many of the cases had been closed as suicides or as accidents, deaths caused by accidents. Some of these cases were reopened because of consistent pressure from women's groups who would now support; reach out proactively whenever they heard that a young woman had died. They would reach out to the family of the woman, her natal family, offer help, offer legal aid. Be that intermediary between the woman's family and a legal team, a team of lawyers, provide the handholding support and motivation the family required to stay the long haul with the case. Taking a particular case to court, which as you know, is no easier now and certainly it could not have been easy then, right? So also recording the dying statements of women, which is an important indictment in such cases where women are severely burnt and on the deathbed it becomes very important to get their dying statements on what was done to them. And also trying to stop the remarriage of the families of the guilty men; trying to stop remarriage of the men.

So trying to, so this was done through a variety of means. It was not only demonstrations and *morchas,* it was also the birth, the era that saw the birth of feminist theatre, women's theatre that was political explicitly. That was all about politicising the personal, taking the purely domestic outside of the realms of family, placing it within public view, appealing to the conscience of a society where it was almost normal for a young woman to suddenly die of severe burns. So plays like *Om Swaha* was staged in women's colleges, in public places, in marketplaces, in the neighbourhoods in which the guilty families lived, in which the murder had been staged as a way of appealing to the conscience of a broader public.

So the symbol of the burning bride then, if you look at posters, poetry, song books from this period you will find the symbol of the burning bride then becomes something that allows the issue of domestic violence, not only dowry deaths per se, but also domestic violence more widely to be brought in to the public arena. And therefore, there is once again pressure from women's groups and their mobilisation as an outcome of which the state begins to investigate all suspicious deaths, all deaths within seven years of marriage.

So none of this, we must also remember the 1983 amendments to the law that I talked about, all of that follows on the heel of a concerted mobilisation and vigorous public action by women's groups and women's movements in India, none of which can be taken for granted. So I just want to also place that before you, but therefore pressuring then the state to investigate all deaths, suspicious deaths within seven years of a marriage. Also to make, to expand the definition of cruelty to a wife, to include physical harassment and mental

harassment, to make it a non-bailable offence and so on. Now what is also interesting is during this period, I am now still in the 70s in the 80s, demonstrations, *morchas* and so on also start to give way to setting up legal aid cells, creating short stay homes, creating spaces of shelter.

Because where would women fleeing violent, abusive families go to if they were not welcome in their natal families and many of them were simply not, or if natal families did not have the means to provide for them even if they were sympathetic. So there is a need therefore to also create safe spaces and institutions that provide those spaces and services, legal services in many cases also vocational training, alternative income training if there were women were economically dependent up to that point of time.

So now, this raises, this sort of very sustained organisational, intense organisational work raises a set of questions and dilemmas. It did raise a set of dilemmas for women's movement activists and organisers during that point of time. For instance, who was to fund this work? The most obvious dilemma, how were they to raise funding for this work? So clearly, public demonstrations happen through another kind of energy. But then if you need to create organisations, you need resources. Who was to fund this work? Was the State to fund it? Now, that was problematic because often women's groups were fighting the State; the State was the adversary. They were moving the State to act, but they were also fighting the State. And they feared that State funding would mean a loss of independence. But foreign funding then was also something that was anathema for another set of very similar reasons. So who was to fund this work was one kind of question. The other was the challenges that come with institutionalisation.

So when movements for instance and the volunteer energies that they thrive on and they engender, when they go through the phase of organisation building and establishing institutions, in order often to consolidate the first phase of work, right? as a consolidation of the first phase of work they have done, and because the situation also calls for it, it warrants it, then it raises a set of questions that we can identify as somewhat familiar questions. Because finance is one, the other would be that institutionalising can create hierarchies within organisations that were far less hierarchical to begin with, that were flatter, more democratic spaces, right? Because it could mean that those with the ability to write projects, to write up proposals, to raise funds, to have contacts and networks with donors, etc., or with government

agencies, such individuals may become somewhat more important within an organization's internal hierarchy than workers with another set of skills and competencies.

So institutionalisation then brings with it a set of challenges that have to do with internal hierarchies within organisations and also women's groups, movements' fear of being sucked into work that is seen in some ways as not campaign work, so somewhat reformist work. It is not agitational, mobilisational, public protest-oriented, not necessarily always campaign-oriented. It could also be seen, the creation of organisations and building up of institutions may also be seen by some as a reformist work, which could trigger alarm bells. So all of that was part of the soul searching, the questions being raised, the challenges being faced, the internal debates and discussions within women's groups and women's movements in India at that point of time and I just want to flag it off here. Also, the question of casework: casework is when a woman's family would approach a women's organisation because of a case of domestic violence, the fear of a, you know, an act of violence had been committed or was likely to be committed, the woman would seek help, etc. So casework then, raised a number of dilemmas for women's organisations. Because the organisers would ask themselves the question of whom did they represent? Were they to stay true to their own ideals or were they do respond to the woman's expressed need?

Let me explain that with an example.

Women would often want to, women as in the women who were victims of domestic violence may often, and did often want to return to those families, return to their husbands - for a range of reasons. Economic dependence was one, they had children was another, social stigma of being a woman without a man, and there are words in all our languages, words of abuse, derogatory words: *Vazhavatti* in Tamil, I am sure you can think of equivalent words in Telugu, in Malayalam and Hindi, etc. right to speak of the woman who has lost her life, so to speak, right, which means a woman who does not for whatever reason has left her man and lives by herself. So all these reasons then, would also mean and sometimes these were relationships, the ones they had with their husbands that combined some love and caring with violence. So the women would want the organisation to sort of mediate in such a way that they would be able to go back and live with those partners and in those marriages, while those doing the mediation, the organisers, the leaders within the women's groups may often feel that what was in the woman's best interests was for her to develop economic independence and a state of mind by which she could live alone, live by herself.

So was it their ideal? What is the best life that offers a woman dignity and safety? Or was it what the woman required and the demand that she was making of them? So these were all, there is no answer here, right? There is no one single blanket answer to this. This is just to tell you that these were some of the painful, thorny issues and dilemmas that were faced by organisers within the movements.

And through the 70s and the 80s, you will find that women's groups energies were often directed at the State and against the State. They were either fighting court battles, or they were demanding changes in law, or a new law to be made, right? While this has also been critiqued that so much of energy was directed targeting the State, this has also been internally critiqued, but on the other hand, it did bring invisible violence within the home -- what was so far not even seen as violence but seen as normal, as natural as part of the everyday life of a woman -- so it did serve to bring invisible violence within the home on to the political arena, which is also part of what it means to, by the old feminist slogan, *the personal is political*, right. Yes, so as protests against dowry gathered steam and momentum, women's movements in India also then interrogate the family.

The family as a site, family is now identified, represented, written about, spoken about as a site of violence and bias and discrimination. So it is not just outright murder, but also the severe pervasive endemic malnutrition of girls within families, even relatively well-off families. The gender dimensions of malnutrition that were inescapable in a country like India. I mean, poverty decides that this is the size of the pie. But then how you divide the pie within the home is determined not by poverty, but by patriarchy, right, and that is fairly unmissable. So malnutrition, the gendered face of child malnutrition, the neglect and the denial of affection to girls within families, other overt forms of bias against the girl child and also from the 1990s, sex-selective abortions.

When in cities like Mumbai you had advertisements, when the scan centres, when scanning first became available you had advertisements that would say, public advertisements that would say, say spend rupees 500 now, save rupees five lakhs later, right. So 500 was the payment to determine the sex of the unborn child, the foetus. The five lakh is the dowry payment, the expense of a marriage, right? So that, all of which then meant that sexual violence becomes one moment then in a long spectrum of violence, right, it becomes one moment in a long spectrum of violence, in a long experience of violence. Other forms of violence sometimes are no less terrible, no less horrific, right, and you also have during this

period you may have been aware of this journal called *Manushi*. Madhu Kishwar was then the editor of *Manushi*. *Manushi* also played a very important role in terms of building a feminist consciousness. It spoke of, it represented the family also as a site of danger where women were concerned, and spoke of the need to defend women's civil liberties within families, saying that women's battles often would have to necessarily begin at home. As women civil liberties and civil rights can often be violently violated within home and familial spaces. All of this is building that consciousness as well.

Now, I have a question for you. Maybe I'll ask you a question now at this point. What do you think are women's issues? So far I've said rape, sexual violence, dowry, wife beating, domestic violence, sex-selective abortions. So these are women's issues, right. That's it? End of story? I've laid them all out? No? What have I left out?

Student: Honour Killings.

Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran: Honour killings, okay.

Student: Unemployment.

Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran: Unemployment, okay.

Student: Income inequalities.

Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran: Income inequalities, yes.

Student: Almost all of these are happening because of the social structure.

Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran: Okay, the social structure itself, right. So no, I am saying what could women identify as their issues? What would women identify? And so this is a bit broad. So unemployment is certainly one. Price rise is certainly another. Wages, the question of wages, equal wages for women is another. Drought and famine, the collapse of livelihoods is another. Communal peace and harmony is one more. I mean, what are not women's issues really, right? So I will maybe make five more minutes and then, right and then questions and then a break. Is that okay? Yes, Matangi.

So I want to say that it is important we note that feminists in India right from the beginning of all ideological views really emphasised work conditions, emphasised work. The availability of employment for women, the conditions in which women were labouring, the returns to labour by which we mean wages, right? And so, Indian women's movements were also about defending and asserting women's rights as workers and as women.

After all, a vast majority of women in India are not, have not been and were not white-collared workers in the professional occupations, salaried workers, but are women who are peasants, who are part of the land-poor majority, women who are workers, sometimes in factories more often in the informal sector.

So an example would be of the Pune conference that happened in October 1975, also called the United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference, which saw about 700 women coming together from across social classes. Women who are tribals, who are peasants, college teachers, school teachers, bank workers. One of the important demands made by the conference was to defend the right of women to participate in social production. Social production is paid employment outside the home.

So it was also among the many demands made. This was one of the important demands and this was a conference that also centred around-work related demands of women, women's identities, both as workers and as women. Defending women's rights to paid employment, the absolute need for women to have paid employment outside the home.

This was also a period that saw the publication of a very important document in the year 1974. It was called the *Towards Equality* document that was released by the Committee on status of women in India. The committee had been set up by the Indian state to conduct an official inquiry into the conditions of women, the social, economic, political status and conditions of women in the years following India's independence.

The *Towards Equality* report was a wakeup call across the country to several constituencies. Certainly to women's movements and activists, but also to researchers, to state actors, to policymakers because what the towards equality report made very evident based on a sort of a well-crafted study, so rigorously executed study, so there was a lot of data and evidence to back that, was that women had fared very poorly in relation to men with respect to paid work, with respect to education, both basic levels of education, middle levels as well as higher levels, with respect to political participation, access to health services.

It also flagged off the declining sex ratio in India's population commenting on that. And the marginalisation generally of women in the informal sector, working in agriculture. So the *Towards Equality* report published in 1974 generally it seemed to, it was very clearly making the statement that the promise of independence had failed the vast majority of India's women, right?

Following this report, the ICSSR, the Indian Council for Social Science Research, commissioned and announced a series of studies then, into women status and condition. These studies in turn were interesting because what they did was to bring researchers within the purview, within the ambit of the women's movements in India. So you had now researchers who are being drawn to the women's movement because of what the data was telling them, that they were not equal citizens of a free Republic, right?

And so in that, you can see I mean, there are numerous copies of the *Towards Equality* report, you can easily download one online and you can see for yourself, the report that has often been seen as marking a very important milestone in Indian women's movements. Because it was also once again, a call for action, for what needed to be done for the gaps, for the failures, for how state and civil society must be pushed and what they must be pushed towards.

So ’72, the early 70s also saw the birth of SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association. SEWA, a trade union, a women's trade union. SEWA’s founders broke away from a union of both men and women, but largely a male-dominated union, they sort of broke away from that union in order to focus on unionising women within the informal sector. So women rag pickers, homebased tailors, head loaders, cleaners, composed the bulk of SEWA’s membership.

As a women's trade union SEWA was making it very, very clear that women were everywhere, and that women constituted the bulk of the working poor of India, something that India's policymakers could not afford to miss. Also then it, SEWA’s creation, the *Towards Equality* report happening at the same time also meant there was a lot of discussion around the conditions of women's work with specific reference to the informal sector, where women are working with absolutely no protection, no state-legislative protection, by protection, you know what I mean: no guaranteed wages, no minimum wages, no right to form trade unions being protected, no social security benefits, pensions, maternity benefits, provident fund, no access to training, skill building in whatever occupations they were in, no access to bank credit, to markets, to productive technologies, right? So women were crowding the lower ends of the informal sector: flower sellers, fish vendors, fruit sellers, vegetable vendors in a multitude of other extremely low paying occupations.

So you have then, for the first time in the sixth five-year plan and you know that India has had a history of development planning, right? It had a planning commission, right, so the

sixth five-year plan, the period of the plan was 1980 to 1985. The sixth plan was again a milestone document because for the first time it had a chapter called *Women and Development*, a chapter titled Women and Development for the first time. What did that mean?

It meant that until then, women were perceived by planners, by governments as mothers, homemakers, wives, or as the recipients of the State's welfare programmes. Until then, women's agencies as workers, as producers, as peasants, as farmers, as traders, as earners, as income earners had simply not been taken into account, had not been factored into state planning, development planning mechanisms.

So the fact that women are really only seen as reproducers, as mothers, as the bearers of babies, itself points to a huge bias, a huge gender bias in public representations of women. So if you have eighth plan for the first time speaking of women in the light of economic development, and therefore talking about what women are contributing to economic development of the national economy and the household economy, let us also keep in mind that this was because of the mobilizational work, the consciousness-raising work that was done by women's movements.

So women's movements are also, have also been pushing on to planners tables, an alternative vision in which women are equal citizens by way of also being workers and economic producers. There is of course, a global story as well to this, which I do not want to get into but globally as well this is the decade when women's development units are created within a large number of aid-donor agencies, within the development sector and there is academic writing and so on about how women's identities and women's agency as workers, producers, peasants, traders, has so far been ignored. And the loss is not only women's, the loss is the nation's, the economy’s.