

Feminism: Concepts and Theories
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Feminism in India: Trajectory and Concerns - Part 02

We have spoken about work, conditions of work, wages; is there something we have left out? A range of economic demands that could be made on behalf of women from peasant households: Land, right? Land ownership in an agrarian context then the glaring disparities, gender disparities in ownership of land, a very fundamental source of wealth and assets in rural India.

So, I wonder if you have all heard of the famous Bodhgaya struggle, which is a celebrated struggle in the history of India, a land rights struggle that was led by the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* led by Jaiprakash Narayan. And the struggle was in Gaya district of Bihar, starting in the late 1970's, in 1978, when a temp, against a temple *math* that controlled about 10,000 acres of land, the struggle was to acquire some of that land and to redistribute it among the landless poor in the district and among sharecroppers, the majority of whom belong to Dalit households.

Finally, after a heroic and very intense struggle in 1981, about 1,500 acres of land were distributed by the Government of Bihar conceding victory to those who struggled. But what is important about this struggle is the fact that women peasants and fighters within the struggle also put forward their rights to land. They asked to be made joint *patta* holders along with their men. So when land was being redistributed, taken away from the *math* and distributed to the landless poor. Now the question would obviously raise as to in whose name would the land *patta*, the title be made out, right? Initially, the movement was willing to give land to women who are widows, but not to married women. And it was women then from the struggle who raised the voice of: why should we be pushed aside, when it comes to the redistribution of land, although we have struggled as equals with you, with our men, we face the lathies of the police? We have gone to jail. We have carried little children on our backs and our hips and walked miles. Why are we being pushed aside when it comes to the redistribution of land?

Also, they made the interesting and important point that, and this is something you bear in mind, that amongst the poorest households, the poorest castes, the subordinate castes and poorest households, intra household relations are more likely to be equal. There is no property, there is no wealth. So now the women were saying if you are giving land, but then only to the men, and we had nothing, neither of us had anything earlier, but you are titling only men, you are giving land titles only to men. Then tomorrow, the man can say, get out, I have the land. Where does that leave us? And there were very interesting dialogues and conversations and arguments that have been recorded.

For instance, the district officer in charge of land distribution, believed that it was an article of faith with him, that land must go to the head of the household who can only be a man, right? But women had to fight him. They had to fight men within their households and they had to fight their male activists and comrades within the struggle. This is why the Bodhgaya struggle has been called a struggle within a struggle. And to that, for that reason remains an iconic, inspiring, land rights struggle, one of a kind in South Asia.

So, for instance, when male activists would ask, what difference does it make in whose name land is given? Why do you make a big deal of it? The women replied, well, if it makes no difference, then put it down in women's name. Why argue about it? And ultimately, if it makes no difference then let it remain with the *Mahant*. Why ask for the land in the first place? So, the position they put forward was that the demand for equality can only strengthen our struggle and our organization. It cannot weaken it; because if we do not have women's name in the *pattas* then we are in effect transferring power from one set of men to another set of men.

What is important is to note how this came to be. One was, of course, a strong solidarity among the women peasants, especially on the question of land. The second was the, the links Bodhgaya struggle had with the wider climate of women's movements in the country; there were also women from an urban middle-class background, who were part of the struggle right from the early stages and who played an important part in bringing an explicit feminist consciousness into the struggle and into demands made by the struggle, right?

And there was also, like I said, this the links between, the widespread climate of in the country which was women's movements on the rise across the country. So, the Bodhgaya land rights

struggle was also one that brought a number of issues to the forefront in addition to land rights for women. They were, the struggle against wife beating within the household. If we are equal comrades in the struggle, then why is it okay for you to beat me in the home?

So, wife beating and verbal abuse of women, the very casual everyday verbal abuse of women in society, the demand to send girls to school for instance and to continue to send girls to school, the fight against male alcoholism. So, all of this then makes, made the Bodhgaya struggle an iconic struggling in South Asia. Now, I won't, I would like us to also consider some debates within women's movements during this period, debates that had to do with how women's movements organized themselves. Some feminists believed that it was best to be a part of a larger organization like a trade union, a *Kisan Sangha*, a peasant union, a workers' union or even a political party and to raise feminist consciousness within that larger public forum, within that organizational space to sensitize an organization, a large mass-based organization of which they were a part to sensitize members of that organization to issues of gender was the way forward.

According to some women who therefore, then aligned themselves with trade unions political parties, they also thought that this was the more effective means and the root for them to establish contact with vast masses of women in India to belong to a peasant union would mean the opportunity to meet and interact with and have conversations with rural women, peasant women.

On the other hand, there was also a point of view, some others who felt that autonomous women's groups were the best mode of functioning. Because such structures would allow for more independent functioning in a space that is more inclusive, more egalitarian, less hierarchical, as political parties tend to be hierarchical in their modes of internal operation and functioning.

So, autonomy itself is obviously differently interpreted. Some feminists interpreted autonomy to mean not attaching, a feminist group must not attach itself to any political party but must remain independent of all political parties; some interpreted autonomy to mean that; whereas some others were more flexible on that, but interpreted autonomy to mean more democratic functioning, more independent functioning; some women's groups were more willing and sought out linkages and alliances with larger mass-based organizations; some others feared domination

and cooption and therefore, believed in maintaining a distance; and there were debates about this as well, which I cannot go into, but I would like to flag this off. But then, also, I want to end this section by saying that all feminists in India, however, agreed that the fight for women's rights had to be linked to, and situated within, fights against multiple forms of social and economic oppression. This was a consensus view: however organizations operated, that women's rights could not be seen in isolation, but must be linked to broader larger battles to democratize Indian society and to counter and take on all other kinds of social and economic oppression. Now, the turn in the 1980s, and especially the 1990s. But also let us begin with the 80s. Women's movements were faced with a specter of community crimes and the rise of fundamentalisms, religious fundamentalism.

You may have heard of Roop Kanwar's murder, also called Sati in 1987. In case, you have not, Roop Kanwar was a very young woman, recently married, within a few months of marriage, she lost her husband to an illness. Her own family, her natal family, was not informed instead a public Sati was staged. It is believed that she refused, but she was drugged and was dressed in her bridal finery, placed on the pyre; the pyre was lit by her brother in law, by members of her husband's family and it was public. It was staged as a public spectacle.

So, women's groups then reacted to this outrage by talking about and protesting Roop Kanwar's murder, as a case, as an extreme form of violence against women. But on the other hand, groups within the State of Rajasthan, many groups consisting of young men, and women of the Rajput community marched, defending what they saw as Rajput custom and their right to practice their custom. And women no less than men participated in these marches and in these events, celebrating their right to practice their custom.

Another case then mid-1980s, '85 to '87 was that of Shah Bano. Shah Bano was a 62 year old Muslim woman, who was sent out of her home by her husband with her five children and she sought maintenance for herself to support herself and her family. Shah Bano's a plea for maintenance was accepted by the Supreme Court that ruled in her favor. But in a controversial move, the Supreme Court, also as part of the same ruling called for abolishing of separate personal laws, and the adoption of a uniform Civil Code.

So that was a trigger and it was perceived by Muslim orthodoxy as an attack on their right to practice their religion and Muslim women were mobilized to come out in support of their community and their men in this instance, just as Rajput women in the other instance participated in huge marches defending the Sati incident in Rajasthan. So, in both the case of Shah Bano and Roop Kanwar, what we see is male leaders and politicians, using women as symbols to defend the identity of the community as custodian of the community's honor, calling upon women to come out in defense of the community.

What was the position of women's movements here? Women's movements were disillusioned with the State primarily, because they saw that the Rajiv Gandhi Government passed a Muslim women's Right to Protection Bill that excluded Muslim Women from Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code granting them maintenance in case of divorce. So this was seen as the Rajiv Gandhi Government, the Central Government, capitulating to Muslim orthodoxy after opening the gates of the shrine within the Babri Masjid complex, right? in order to placate a section of Hindus; do you see this? So it was seen as a tightrope walking act, a balancing act by the Central Government, right? If you want more detail on that history, I cannot give it to you, but you can certainly Google it. But where did that leave women's groups then women, it left women's groups disillusioned with the State. So remember, I want to return to this fraught relationship between women's movements and the State.

It left women's groups and movements disillusioned with the State, also disillusioned at the doublespeak of the State, the State speaks in many voices. In Rajasthan, the State is a defender of Sati, local government bodies, including, at the level of the State Government, there are several who speak in defense of Sati. But on the other hand, the State also produces pro-women documents, right? So, you have on the one hand, how you sort of see that the State is janus-faced, right? The States speaks in many voices; the learning is also that the State perhaps cannot be seen, understood as a singular unitary entity. It is a many-headed beast speaking in many voices.

So, now the learnings from this period, this very troubled period in history, the assumption of many activists was that women participating in the religious right were coerced, were forced, or they did not adequately understand the issues at stake; that some women, or even many women,

may have willingly participated was not accepted at least publicly by women's groups. Because women's groups then, what was happening here was that this idea of women's unity, of sisterhood, of solidarity was something that was being undercut by differences, by very real differences of class, of caste, of religion, of political ideology, right? So this did not nullify sisterhood, but it certainly problematized the idea, an easy idea of sisterhood. This also, this did not mean I mean, I do not mean to say, of course, the women's groups were so far unaware of differences among women. They were not unaware. But there was a need to believe in solidarity in sharing that sort of push the implications of difference to the background. But they had to be, the implications of difference had to be confronted. So that is something that is also a learning from this period.

We also then have the question of how emerging Dalit feminisms in the 1990s engaged in discussions and conversations with women's movements. For instance, Dalit feminists pointed out that rape, sexual assault was usually not a sort of a one-off incident of violence in the lives of Dalit women. Rather, it was part and parcel of the everyday lives of Dalit women. Because what they meant to say was that the sexual exploitation of women from landless Dalit households was the mode by which caste and class power were expressed in rural India, right? Do you get what I am saying? Yeah? That is how caste and class power were expressed in rural India. Untouchability, they pointed out was not the same experience for Dalit women as it was for Dalit men, since sexual services had always been forcibly demanded from Dalit women by upper caste, landlords and landowners. So, the forced sexual availability of Dalit women, therefore, in a sense, marked or was a marker of the oppressed caste status of Dalits as a community.

The institutionalized access then to Dalit women's bodies, was part of the organizing logic of a caste - class society. You see what I am saying? And therefore, and the point that they also made was that when Dalit women were attacked and abused, that attack, sexual violence unleashed against Dalit women also served a particular purpose, which was not the case, in other cases, because the point of that attack was to teach a lesson to Dalits as a community; the point of the attack was to reproduce, to sustain upper caste dominance, perhaps in the face of challenges to caste hegemony, that were also emerging, right?.

So to establish, reestablish caste authority, to humiliate Dalits as a community, to teach a lesson. So, there is a different logic then, and this requires that the relationship between caste and patriarchy be very... and sexual violence and the place of sexual violence in this relationship, be very clearly understood and articulated. And Dalit feminists were pushing this consciousness forward.

And, for instance, an example and this is something that you could also look at online. The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights has a very massive three volume study called *Dalit Women Speak Out*, which shows, which sort of details elaborates the many conditions in which Dalit women face sexual violence. They face sexual violence when they transgress caste boundaries, when they actively defy caste norms, and this could be that they are using common ponds, they are grazing cattle, they are accessing the PDS (the public distribution system) and they are disallowed from doing that, they are claiming common land or forest land, right? or they refusing to perform cast determined services, traditional caste labor, degrading caste labor. So that is that also sort of points to the way in which sexual violence plays a particular role here. So therefore, then the point that they are, the point of view that they are putting across is that sexual violence emerges not as an extraordinary act of violence, but as very much a part, a condition of existence for Dalit women from landless Dalit households. And “have you taken adequate cognizance of this?” is what Dalit feminists have asked from Indian women's movements.

Another learning then from this period of the 80s and the 90s, the 90s in particular, was that women's movements assumptions, organizer's assumptions that women are inherently non-violent. And that if there is, for and can, in the case of a caste conflict or a communal riot, women are always only victims. Because it is women who are attacked sometimes and if men die, they are left widowed. They have to rebuild lives. They have to look after children, they have to raise children in the face of violence. So then this narrative, in which women could only be victims, is also challenged, when the studies of communal riots in India in the late 1980s the Bhagalpur and Surat riots and then the Bombay riots '92 to '93 show that women could also participate in and support their men who are aggressors by defending their men or preventing the police from reaching an area where a communal riot was happening, when their men were involved in attacking women of the minority community.

This has also been observed and documented, in fact-finding commissions. So that women can be complicit in acts of violence against other women is also a very painful learning then for Indian women's movements, a painful realization that women can be as aggressive, as violent as, as the men of their community, right? So, this is once again, a period that is, that raises very difficult questions for women's movements.

From the 1990s and the 2000s then, women's movements are also asking the question, how may we best defend the human rights and gender rights of women who live in areas of conflict in India be it the Northeast, be it Kashmir, what are their issues? And how maybe respond to their issues? Right? Because women identify from these regions, identify as women, but also equally as members of an embattled minority group from their regions, right... So it is a question of dual identity.

And women have, and these are situations in which there could be numerous security cordons, check posts, uniformed personnel, entering homes, entering the safety of homes during the late evening hours and night hours. So women's concerns of safety and dignity become particularly fraught in these regions. And at the same time, a prolonged period and climate of repression and hostility could also mean that communities in turn, internalize that and they can often become punitive towards their own weaker members. For instance, a situation a very fraught situation politically could mean that domestic violence within families may be on the rise as men take out their frustrations on women. But then women do not have the space may not have the space of turning to the police for protection or to the law enforcement agency seeking protection, right? Because the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the community as a whole is a very troubled relationship that women are very well aware of. This is something I am sure that you would be able to imagine, right...

So these are all the complexities then a women's positions in these situations. And women's movements then have to learn, they have to teach themselves that we must understand women's dilemmas within, when women live in a culture of militarization, where separatist movements and the State apparatus face off each other, right? For instance, it means learning how sexual violence is constituted by us militarized culture and in turn plays a part in constituting a militarized culture, right? In practical terms, this has meant for women's movements in other

parts of India the question of how best to extend solidarity to participate perhaps in fact-finding teams and missions and exercises wherever gendered violence and human rights violations have taken place. Many of you might be familiar with the Mothers of Manipur, for instance, an example in July 15th of 2004 when the Mothers of Manipur as the group is called, as they were the torchbearers of Manipur, they would carry flaming torches -- they have had their own tradition of feminism, indigenous to their region, carrying flaming torches, conducting nighttime vigils against male alcoholism but also then, protecting their the young from their boys from their community from being taken away for by for interrogation purposes; so they were called the Mothers of the Manipur who would carry flaming torches -- there was that particular iconic moment in July 2004 when 12 women stood stark naked, holding a white banner, that read "Indian Army rape us".

They had just heard of the rape, torture, and murder of Thangjam Manorama, a 23 year old young woman from Manipur allegedly by the 17th Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force. And what they said was: we are all Manorama's mothers. For more detail on this, you could look for the *Amnesty International Report India, 2005*. But this is, I wish to also say, I wish to make the point here that this was a powerful message to, what the mothers of Manipur did, was a powerful message to women's groups in particular in the rest of the country, because they were reminding women's groups of the particular situation in which they found themselves and what solidarity would mean in their context. What it meant also was that was for women's groups from across India to provide support to their demand that AFSPA must be revoked. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, right the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, makes it impossible for any member of the armed forces in uniform to be prosecuted without sanction from the central government for any crime they commit.

So women's groups in the Northeast demanded that AFSPA be repealed in their state and women's groups across the country endorsed their demand as just and necessary, saying that women in conflict areas are entitled to the same safety and dignity that women are in any other part of India. This has also been a recurring concern and demand that has been raised for instance, by the UN Special Rapporteurs on violence against women.

So I want to sort of, I will give you about 10 minutes for questions, but I just sort of want to bring it to the point of where we are today. Where are we today? So, you look around us and you see that caste patriarchies are mobilizing to control, young women's autonomy, freedoms and mobility. In Tamil Nadu to have the backward caste, dominant backward caste, intermediate backward caste, campaigning against intercaste marriages, if you have been following the news, especially where they involve, what the historian Uma Chakravarti, calls *Pratilomik* Unions or *Pratilomik* elopements, an elopement between a woman of higher caste status and a man of relatively subordinate cost status, right? So in this case in Tamil Nadu, where the man is from the Dalit community and the woman is from an OBC community then you have had some very vicious murders also called honor killings. So if this is happening on the one hand, on the other hand, and I gave this as an example to say that caste patriarchies are mobilizing to control young women's autonomy, mobility and freedoms today. On the other hand, you also have Khap Panchayats in North India and many states saying mobile phones and jeans are out for girls and all the rest of that.

The entitlement of young men has not waned either, because you have had, you also have news of stalking, murder, acid attacks against women who refuse men who propose marriage to them. So there is this meme, right that I saw somewhere it says, "Say yes to a boy, your parents kill you. Say no to him, he kills you." So as I see it, there are feminist voices that are emerging from different corners of India today in perhaps dispersed fashion that are using social media spaces to make the claim that a woman has the right to say both yes and no.

And women's movements in a sense young women's feminisms have been fighting to advance women's agency to defend strides forward that have been that have been made by young women with respect to employment, paid work, or education by saying that all rights must be women's rights, right? Caste patriarchies cannot intervene, cannot be mediators or brokers between women and their constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. That is to say, caste patriarchies cannot be allowed to say "so far and no further, you may go up to class 12 even up to college, but you cannot choose a partner of your own." So, so far and no further. So, but feminist movements and voices now are, as I see it, asserting women's right to choose their partners, to stay out late, to travel, to work, to live by themselves, to study, and to remain safe. There cannot be a trade off here. As I saw it the post-Nirbhaya killing protest that I saw in Delhi, but then in other cities to

December 2012, I have not seen so many at least in my lifetime, so many young men and women out on the streets in a case involving violence against a woman.

What I found particularly important was during the Nirbhaya protest, many young people, girls, but also young men holding posters saying, “Do not teach us how to dress, teach your sons not to rape,” right? “Do not teach us what to do, teach your sons what not to do.” So I saw this as an important public education campaign because it was through the media, through TV channels that this image, this particular way of looking at young women's freedoms, is being relayed across homes, across the country.

Also, I remember during this period Kavita Krishnan’s viral video “Bekhauf Azadi,” a freedom without fear delivered in front of former Chief Minister, Delhi Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit’s home in 2012 also garnered, so many millions of views. So, this is I thought, this was I thought a very, very productive moment. I am going to close it on this because I believe that you are going to be discussing as part of your course later in the conclusion section of your course, you are going to be discussing movements that are “Happy to Bleed,” right? Young women claiming that they have the right to feel proud about the fact that they are also, they also menstruate. So you are going to discuss that, you are going to discuss *Pinjra Tod*, which is young women's campus feminisms, women of Delhi University, but other campuses saying that their freedoms cannot be curtailed, right? So and Me Too, as well is going to be part of your discussion in this course. So I am not going to anticipate those discussions. I am going to sort of leave it here, of course, inviting questions from you.

But also as a finishing note, what I would like to say is that there is, as I see it, women's movements in India have been quite open in terms of accommodating voices of dissent, accepting criticisms, being introspective, reflective, and using opportunities for growth and for widening their own trajectories and ways of imagining and dreaming women's emancipation!