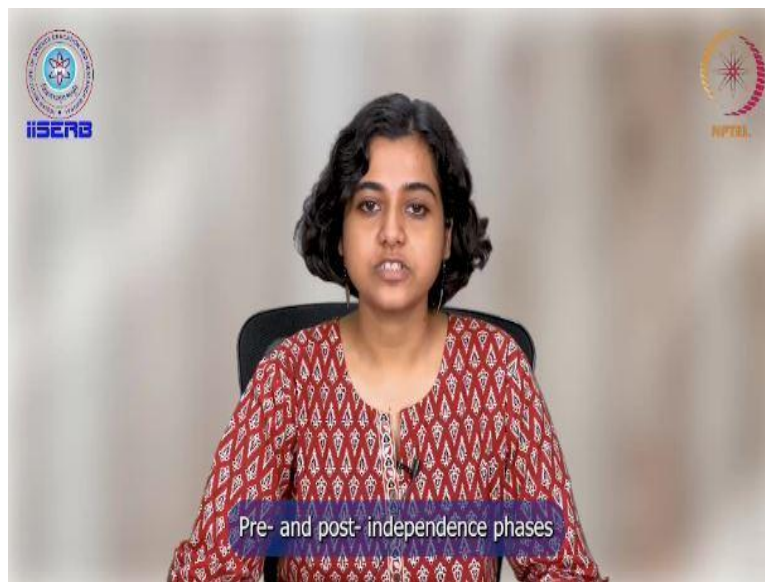


Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
Prof. Dr. Anandita Pan
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Science Education and Research-Bhopal

Lecture-04
Women's Activism

Hello everyone. In the previous lectures we learned about the history of feminist movement in India.

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We saw if we divide Indian feminism into pre- and post-independence phases. There is a tremendous difference in terms of what issues were taken up and how? We saw how women's progress was made and important and intrinsic part of the social reformist movement. The social reformers took up the questions of sati and widowhood to show that India is capable of getting rid of its bad traditions and emerges as an independent nation.

The important thing that you have to remember is that social reformation did not question the gender hierarchy. Even though, education was made part of the reformist project it was to make the women better wives and mothers. We will discuss this new woman in the next lectures. Also, important to note that these issues and the way they were dealt with changed later on. Women started talking about labour and body.

The post-independence period brought about disillusionment about the idea of women's progress. The promise made by and through the constitution and in the form of development policies did not help a large group of women. If you have any doubts you can go through the videos once again.

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Now one important thing that you need to remember is that, the term Indian feminism is very flimsy. In fact, we cannot have any homogeneous idea of feminism as a single category and practices. And the reason is that there has never been one single kind of feminism in India. What we know as Indian feminism is often the history of the dominant groups such as the upper and middle classes and upper castes?

And that is why it has now come to be called mainstream Indian feminism. The 19th century not only saw the women's causes as the center of social reformation it also saw the rise of women activists both as participants and as leaders.

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The 1910 to 20 the period is credited with the first attempts at setting up an all-India women's organizations.

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From the late 19th to the early 20th century, they were followed by local or regional women's organizations such as the Banga Mahila Samaj, the Aghorekamini Nari Samiti in Bengal, the Satara Abalonnati Sabha in Maharashtra, the Mahila Seva Samaj in Bangalore, the Bharat Mahila Parishad in Banaras and the Prayas Mahila Samiti in Allahabad.

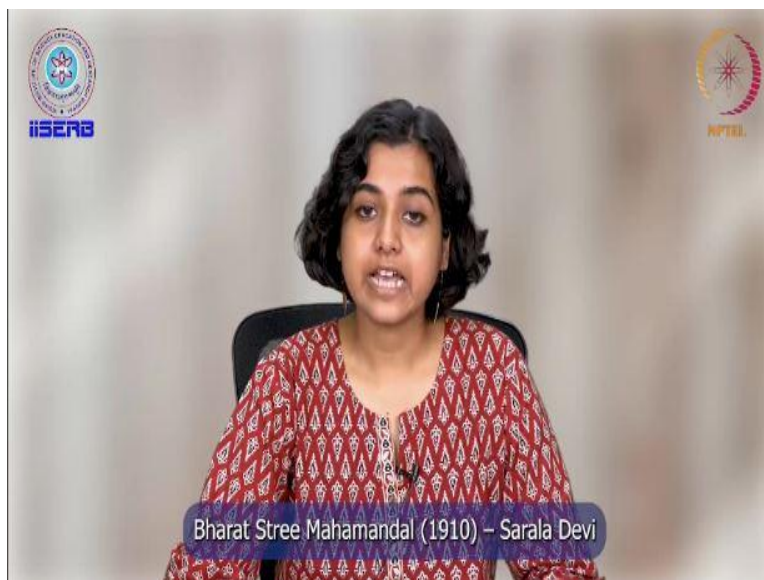
These organizations largely focused on promoting self-help inculcating the codes of ideal Hindu womanhood as a corollary to the new man. And there was a renewed discussion regarding the duties of women as citizens.

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In the 1908, Mahila Parishad or also known as Ladies Congress in Madras women presented 19 papers in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi and English.

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In 1910, Sarala Devi founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal with the object of bringing together women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interests in the moral material progress of women in India.

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The Women's Indian Association established in 1917 was founded by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malathi Patwardhan, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadabhau and Mrs Ambujammal. Annie Besant was a significant phase in the Nationalist movement. In 1915, she announced her intention to start a Home Rule League.

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In 1917, she was elected President of the Calcutta Congress session. In her presidential address Besant mentioned.

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The strength of the home Rule movement was rendered tenfold greater by the adhesion to it of a large number of women who brought to it is help the uncalculating heroism, the endurance, the self-sacrifice, of the feminine nature. Besant therefore based her activism on religion and viewed women's self-sacrificing nature as a source of strength. Subsequently there emerged many real life and contemporary women heroines such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and so on.

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Sarojini Naidu participated in campaigns for widow remarriage, women's education and suffrage. And she joined the non-cooperation movement in 1920 and had been a champion of Hindu Muslim Unity.

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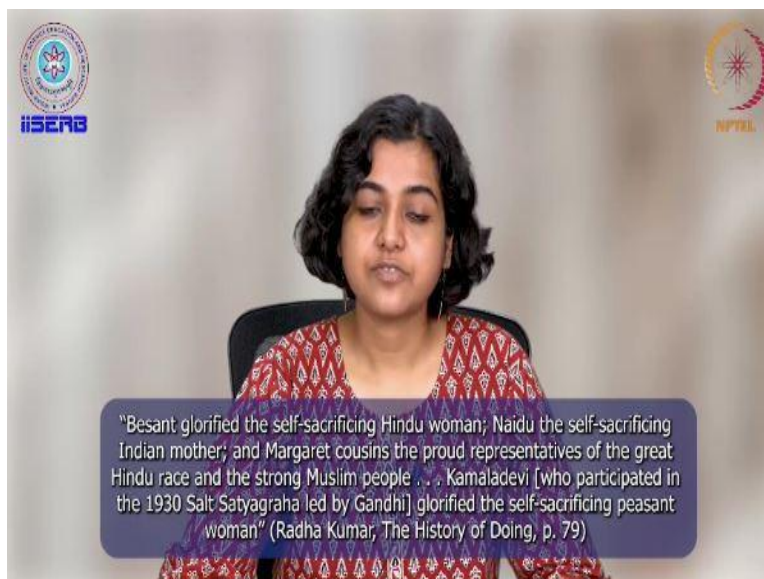


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Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was the founder of All India Women's Conference established in 1926. And was an activist in the Civil Disobedience movement and the Salt Satyagraha. Radha Kumar mentions how Kamala Devi was brought up in the tales of Rajasthani heroines who were long dead. In her book the history of doing Radha Kumar writes how nationalism began creating major rifts between feminists.

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While, Besant glorified self-sacrificing Hindu women; Naidu the self-sacrificing Indian mother; and Margaret Cousins the proud representatives of the great Hindu race and the strong Muslim people. Kamaladevi who participated in the 1930 Salt Satyagraha led by Gandhi glorified the self-

sacrificing peasant woman. It is important to remember that Gandhi was a major reason behind women's mass support in the Nationalist cause.

Interestingly however, his idea of womanhood did not question the patriarchal hierarchy per say. According to Gandhi, the biological differences between men and women not only determined masculinity and femininity. They meant that each had a different role to play and he accepted those roles to be normative. Thus, under the apparent upholding of the virtue of women only certain feminine qualities such as the image of the mother as depository of spiritual and moral values and as a preceptor for men were upheld.

In other words, his definition of women's nature and qualities drew upon the deeply rooted Hindu ideals. So, we can see that despite women's mass presence in the pre-independence and in the post-independence movements. The structure of patriarchy in the pre-independence period remained unquestioned. Parallel to women's participation in nationalist movements the 1920 also saw an interesting growth in terms of women's assertion for equality.

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Urmila Debi a militant nationalist of the 1921-22 movement argued that.

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Swaraj means self-rule and Swadhinata means the strength and power to fulfill ourselves. Women activists questioned their male counterparts to recognize women's rights. Thus, there was a demand for equality based on the principle of sameness rather than complementarity. Now the 3 major areas that mainstream Indian feminism after Independence focused on are recognition that the personal is the political, taking up issues of class and gender and thirdly the establishment of women's study centers.

The realm of the personal and political was put forth through issues of dowry murder, rape within family and custodial rape; all of which highlighted that body does not merely belong to an individual. It is a consequence of several, social, familial, economic and oppressive machinery of the state in action. As Gitanjali Ganguly mentions all of these cases were represented as damage to women's right over their bodies.

Hence, legal redressal was demanded by feminists to ascertain women's rights. Feminist class consciousness brought a revolutionary change in the way women's work and women in the workplace were perceived. The gender inequality at the workplace the double burden of labour took front seat in feminist arguments towards equality report also brought an urgency to make the nation more gender sensitive.

The policy makers in the government resolved this issue by setting up 33 women's study centers in universities across the country that would engage in research and activism and inaugurating a unit in the Indian Council for social science research to support research specifically on women and poverty. Connecting women's movement with building Indian feminism as a theoretical category.

The emergence of women's studies in India was not just limited to knowledge and the conditions of its production within higher education institutions, but at a more ambitious plan involves social change building connections among struggles for social justice and more significantly achieving gender equality. Interestingly, all these articulations were based on the assumption that the category Indian woman is a homogeneous one.

Even when communal differences among women was recognized with the Shaha Bano case in 1980 religion was never really brought to the analytical frame of mainstream feminist discourse. The 1990 brought women's movement to a new juncture.

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The 1995, UN Women's Conference in Beijing brought together a wide array of women from rural and urban backgrounds to the international stage. From 1991 India saw a transition in its economic policy towards more market-driven solution to poverty. This era of liberalization followed by

globalization saw a shift from state-led development. Additionally, the Mandal and the Masjid incidents propelled new questions about India's political landscape.

It was clear then that one could no longer speak of women without reference to caste, class and community. The women's reservation of one-third seats in the panchayati and the municipal governments face criticism from other backward classes also known as OBC. And Muslim lobbies for being elitist.

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By the 1990, when Dalit women's autonomous organizations such as National Federation of Dalit women were emerging, caste was considered either as a separatist or as an additive feature.

Thus, on the one hand Dalit women's issues were left alone to be articulated, by Dalit women for the fear of misrepresentation. And on the other hand, caste was included as an added dimension in syllabi, books and anthologies to the already existing discourse of feminism.

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As Vidyut Bhagat remarks the women's movement has in its enthrallment of 'sisterhood' failed to note the caste factor while the Dalit movement remained patriarchal and seized women's oppression merely as a caste oppression. We will talk about these movements in detail in the next lectures. Now if you remember in one of the earlier classes, we had seen Radha Kumar's classification of Indian feminist movements into 3 parts.

Amongst them the third category was movements showing anti-patriarchal traditions. She mentions that a subdivision can be made between those which were women's movements such as the communist-led food campaigns of the 1940 Chipko movement the anti-alcohol and the anti-price rise movements of the 1970. And those which are primarily dominated by men, but in which large numbers of women were active such as the Nationalist Tebhaga and the Telangana movements.

Movements such as Chipko, anti-alcoholism etcetera were associated to the role of a housewife. Water for domestic use fuel, food etcetera, were all part of these movements. Although in terms of issues and approach these movements were very different. It showed how women's personal matters are impacted by social and economic structures.

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Vandana Shiva in her book Earth democracy writes how much impact the Chipko movement had on her.

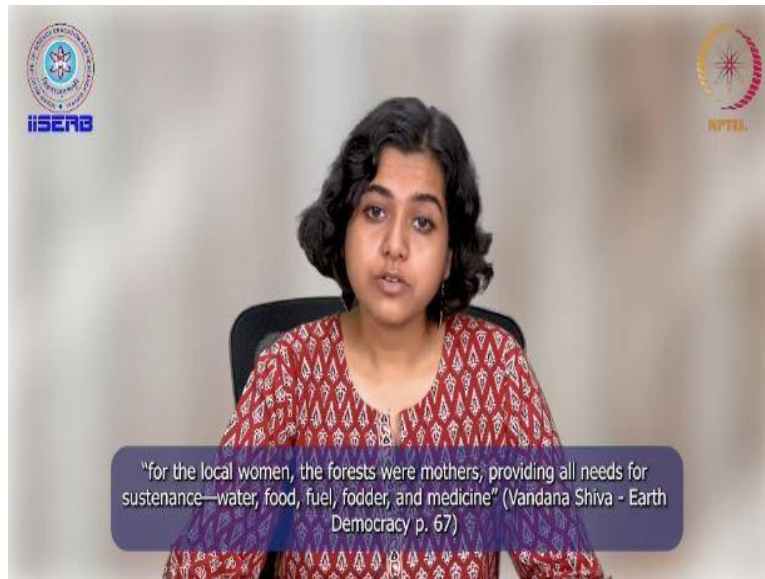
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The Chipko movement of 1973 was a non-violent protest in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand to stop rapid deforestation caused by industrialization and government policies. Women were instrumental to this movement. Chipko literally means hugging and throughout the 1970 women would come out from many villages and hug trees to prevent the logging companies from destroying their forests.

The floods and massive landslides of 1970 made government realize that forests were not timber mines, but ecological security. Vandana Shiva mentions how a valuable a lesson the Chipko movement has been for her.

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She writes for the local women the forests were mothers, providing all needs for sustenance-water, food, fuel, fodder and Medicine.

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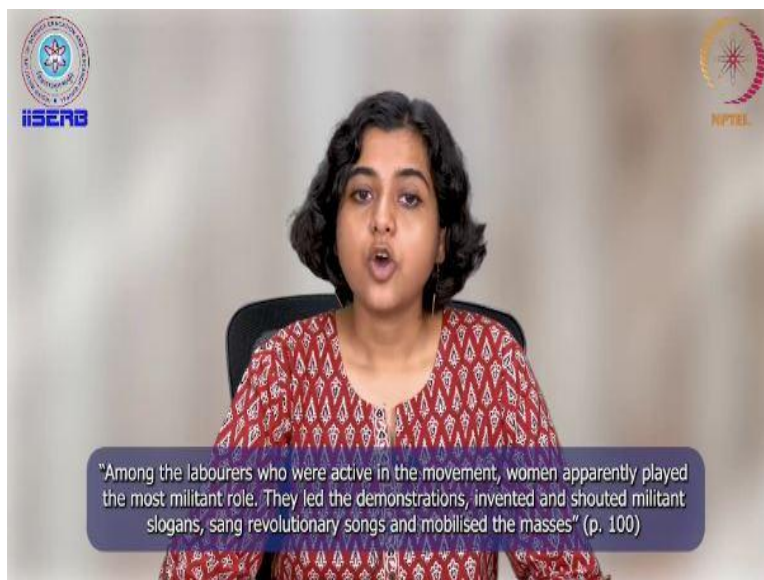
In the context of women's activism, the contribution of Shramik Sangathana established in 1972 is also significant.

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It was formed during the Shahada peasants movement in Dhulya in 1972 in Maharashtra. The movement was a tribal landless laborers movement against local landlords.

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Radha Kumar observes that among the labourers who were active in the movement, women apparently played the most militant role. They led the demonstrations, invented and shouted militant slogans, sang revolutionary songs and mobilized the masses.

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Shramik Sanghatana was also involved in the Anti-alcohol agitation of 1973 in Khamkheda village. What is interesting to note is how these movements make a public issue out of what is generally considered a private problem? Moreover, the involvement of tribal women also shows that the public private the home world binary, which is very prominent in the dominant caste, is blurred in case of tribal communities.

This highlights the core feminist idea that personal is political. Now at this point I think it is important to know, what it means by personal is political?

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It was Carol Hanisch who first used this phrase in notes from the second year Women's Liberation published in 1970. Hanisch's most significant contribution in this context was that whether it is a matter of voting rights or body issues any relationship with power dynamic is a political relationship. Therefore, the personal or the domestic is also now outside, not outside the purview of the political because, gender relations are also results of gender hierarchy.

Therefore, in other words the personal is intrinsically imputed with the political. This idea manifested itself significantly in the movements led in the Northeastern parts of India. Women-led and women participated movements in these states date back to the colonial period.

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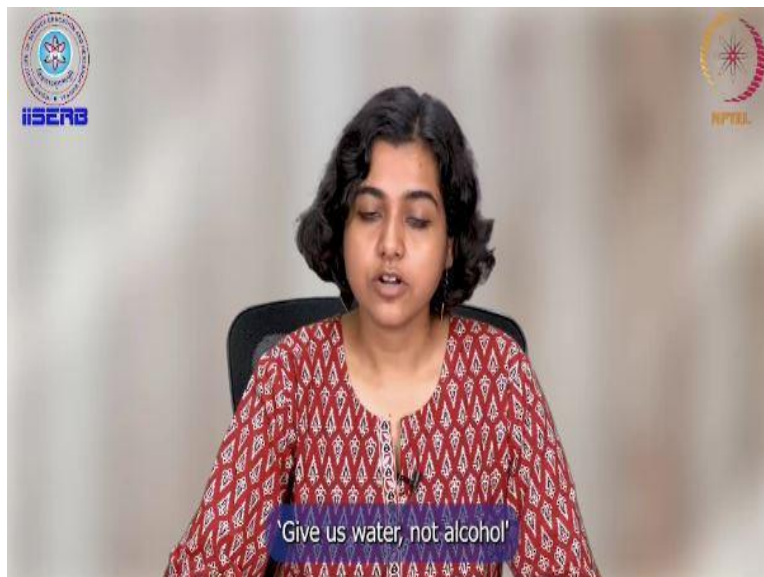
Nupi Lan which happened in 1904 and 1939, 1940 also known as Women's War started against the British rule in Manipur. The first movement in 1904 was against the mandatory wage less labour enforced by the British on the men. The second one was against the excessive rice export that led Manipur to famine and economic deprivation. In both cases the role of women was significant. Their collective protests were met with violence but ultimately, they succeeded.

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Another significant women's movement in Manipur was Meira Paibi in 1977. The origin of Meira Paibi is often linked with Lupila. Meira Paibi are known as the guardians of the society who operated patrol duty at night to ensure safety and also protested against human rights violation by the armed forces. The efforts of Meira Paibi often resembled the format of the anti-alcohol agitation in Khamkeda led by Shramik Sanghatana. In Junagadh in Himachal Pradesh women raised slogans

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Give us water, not alcohol. In Manipur. During the 1970 drug abuse was on the rise, resulting in domestic violence and social unrest. The women started forming groups doing night vigils. Radha Kumar mentions that an interesting aspect of these movements was the use of Shame as tactic to

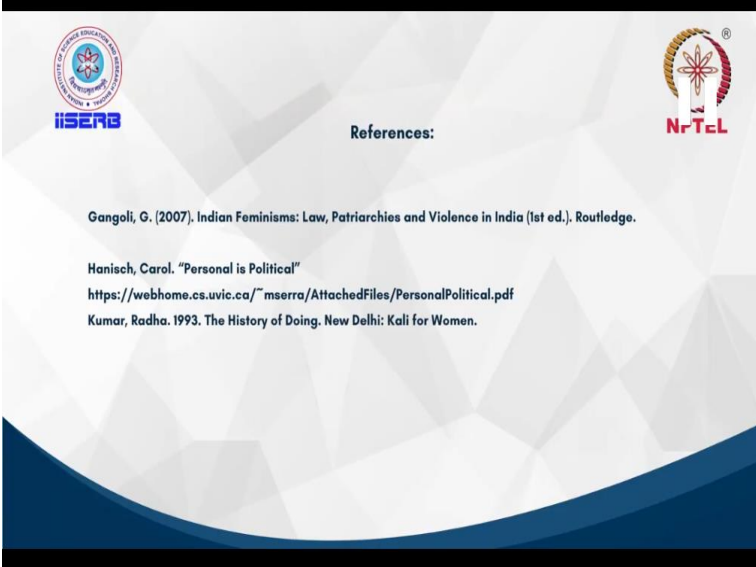
punish men. They would blacken the faces of male culprits to humiliate them before their communities.

It is also notable to see how these movements led to the formation of women's collectives, especially the gathering of ordinary women. The Chipko movement, the movements in Dhulya, Khamkeda, Manipur saw women of different villages gathering to protest against the various kinds of oppression. It also made women realize the importance of viewing the personal as the political.

So, we can see that women's movements flourished in many different directions. And all of them contributed significantly in changing and shaping the feminist consciousness in India. In fact, what we come to realize that, women's movements there is no one single format or no one homogeneous idea of women. In the next lectures we will learn more about such other kinds of feminisms in India.

We will talk about movements which either did not get any place in mainstream feminism or got subsumed within it or emerged as an independent movement. You have to remember that these movements also contributed tremendously to the growth of feminist thought in India. They made us realize that not all women's conditions are the same. And gender functions along with other structures of oppression as well. Thank you.

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- Gangoli, G. (2007). *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Hanisch, Carol. "Personal is Political"
<https://webhome.cs.uvic.ca/~mserra/AttachedFiles/PersonalPolitical.pdf>
- Kumar, Radha. 1993. *The History of Doing*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.