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Unpacking Patriarchies: Feminism and the Humanities in India

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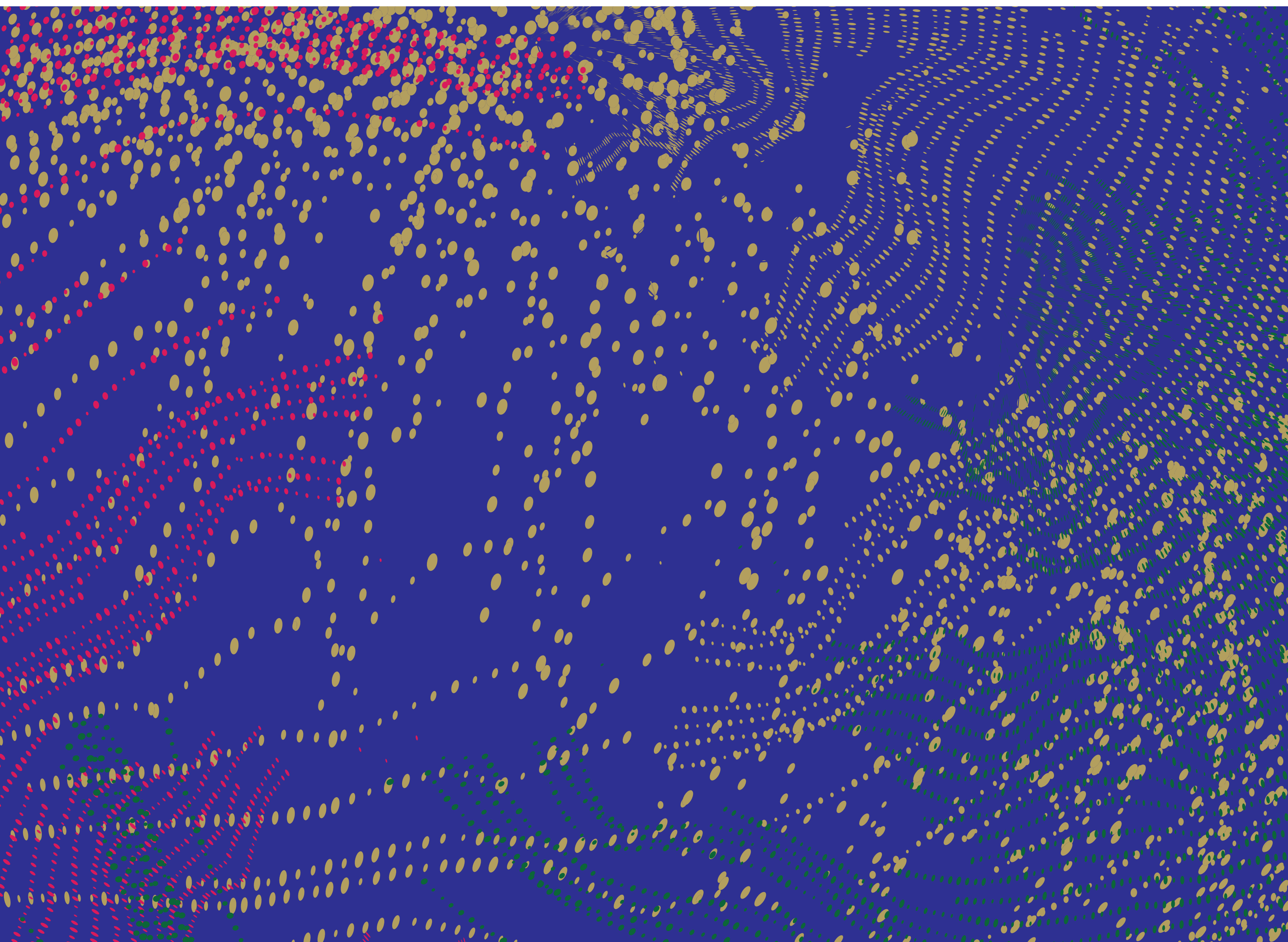

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Unpacking Patriarchies: Feminism and the Humanities in India

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> The ideal state would be reached when women's concerns, perceptions, and problems have been so internalized by different disciplines at different levels of the educational process, that there will be no need for promoting women's studies separately.
>
> —Madhuri Shah[1]

This essay focuses on the ways in which critical and inclusive feminist inquiries and arguments have come to be generated, produced, and sustained in relation to the field of the humanities in India in the past thirty-five years. It will also explore, however, the ways in which these feminist inquiries document two things: first, the knowledge systems they engage with as being partial, subjective, and hierarchical; and second, the inherently inter-, cross-, and transdisciplinary tendencies that emerge both between and beyond the academic disciplines that constitute the field of the humanities. These inquiries may be said to document, in turn, the conditions of production of feminist discourses in and their relation to the field of the humanities in India. We will, therefore, explore the ways in which these conditions have shaped feminist politics both within and outside academe in India.

The explorations that follow are drafted as a series of "maps" regarding, first, the significance of the period in question (i.e., 1985–2020); second, the field in question (i.e., how the humanities have been understood, constructed, and institutionalized in Indian academe in this period); and third, a working understanding of what is meant by the terms "feminist" and "feminism." These "maps" will guide our scrutiny of the dynamic between these three domains of inquiry as a heuristic framework that facilitates the analysis of the relations "mapped" by this essay.

[1] Madhuri Shah, "Report of the First National Conference on Women's Studies," paper presented at the National Conference on Women's Studies, SNDT University, Bombay, April 20–24, 1981.

Mapping the Period, 1985–2020

Our focus on this thirty-five-year period is because it witnessed notable shifts in India's sociopolity in almost every sphere of activity, including economics, politics, religion, media and entertainment, commerce and industry, and public and private social relations and structures. These shifts grew out of important developments that began in the mid- and late 1980s and led into the early 1990s. Four such developments (in no particular order) will serve as signposts indicating the direction taken by these shifts in the subsequent decades: first, the Shah Bano and Deorala controversies and the consequent intensification of religious communalism; second, the globalization and liberalization of Indian broadcast media (television and radio); third, the active pursuit of "economic reforms" entailed/driven by liberalization, privatization, and globalization; and fourth, the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report.[2]

Starting with the first of these, the Shah Bano case refers to a 1985 ruling by the Supreme Court of India that allowed divorced Muslim women to claim the same alimony rights as women of other religious communities. When this led to vehement protests by the patriarchal leaderships of the Muslim communities, the then Indian government overturned this ruling in Parliament by enacting the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act in 1986. This led to outraged protests not only from feminist and human rights groups but also from right-wing Hindu chauvinist forces.[3] Then and on several later occasions, feminist groups and progressive campaigns in India unwittingly found themselves in alignment with the demands and agendas of the Hindu Right. Ironically, these alignments served to strengthen the latter's claims to aiding, enabling, and empowering women (i.e., to being "feminist" in its own right).

Ever since its involvement in the anti-Emergency movement of the late 1970s, the Hindu Right, spearheaded by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Organization) and its many suborganizations have continued to cultivate a public image of themselves as being the last bulwark against the destruction of "Hindu" faith and philosophy, especially by the twin

[2] Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (1980). Two parts of this report are available, respectively, at http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/MandalCommission%20Report%20of%20the%201st%20Part%20English635228715105764974.pdf and http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/Mandal%20Commission%20Report%20of%20the%202nd%20Part%20%20English635228722958460590.pdf.

[3] For useful accounts of the controversy, see Jill M. Oglesbee, "The Shah Bano Controversy: A Case Study of Individual Rights, Religious Tolerance, and the Role of the Secular State," *Inquiries Journal* 7, no. 8 (2015): 3; S. Laurel Weldon, "The Shah Bano Controversy: Gender versus Minority Rights" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1992).

forces of "modernity" and "religious conversion."[4] The Shah Bano case and its fallout, therefore, proved to be a serendipitous opportunity for the Hindu Right to claim a political presence. It was also helped by the controversy that erupted over the ritual suicide, or *sati*, "committed" by Roop Kanwar, a young Hindu widow, in 1987 in Deorala, Rajasthan.[5]

The RSS and its affiliates accused the Indian National Congress (INC) of "Muslim appeasement" in the Shah Bano case. To counter this charge, the INC-led government responded to the *sati* case in a diluted and muted fashion, and when this clearly proved insufficient, it granted permission for Hindus to worship at the Ram shrine located within the disputed premises of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. This countervailing attempt at "Hindu appeasement" resulted in an exacerbation of communal tensions across the country. The INC lost the 1989 general elections massively and has not really recovered.[6] These elections heralded the era of coalition politics in India, which continues to this day. The combination of coalition politics and the communalization of the polity resulted in several crucial representations and narratives being put into play in the public domain that progressively hegemonized the public discourse. These narratives drew a series of links between women's rights, community rights, and the notion of the nation and framed them as contestations as much between "traditional" and "modern" as between communal patriarchies.[7]

With the opening up of television and radio broadcasting (i.e., the second

[4] Prem Kumar Vijayan, *Gender and Hindu Nationalism: Understanding Masculine Hegemony* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[5] Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997). Although *sati* was banned as far back as under British colonial rule, sporadic incidents of *sati* continue to occur, often under coercion. For a more detailed history of the phenomenon and of this particular case, see Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique* 7, no. 7 (1987): 119–56; Anne Hardgrove, "Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 3 (August 1999): 723–52.

[6] It slid from having won 414 (of the 541 contested) parliamentary seats in the 1984 elections to 197 (of 529) seats in 1989. Other important reasons for this decline were the allegations of corruption in the infamous Bofors scandal, failure to hold on to lower-caste vote banks, and a general weakness of leadership. See Walter K. Andersen, "Election 1989 in India: The Dawn of Coalition Politics?," *Asian Survey* 30, no. 6 (1990): 527–40; Inderjit Badhwar and Prabhu Chawla, "Rajiv Gandhi Loses His Charismatic Touch, V. P. Singh Proves to Be a Formidable Campaigner," *India Today*, November 30, 1989, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19891130-general-elections-1989-rajiv-gandhi-loses-his-charismatic-touch-v.p.-singh-proves-to-be-a-formidable-campaigner-816804-1989-11-30. Just as significantly, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) saw its first major electoral gains, going from two to eighty-five seats, in 1989.

[7] Kumkum Sangari, "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies (1 and 2)," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 23, 1995, 3287–310, and December 23, 1995, 3381–89.

of the four developments noted above) and the advent of color television in 1984, Indian television saw more entertainment-based programs, even though Indian television remained completely state owned till 1991. Importantly, these programs included the serialized versions of the two Indian epics, the *Ramayan* (1987, directed by Ramanand Sagar) and the *Mahabharat* (1988, directed by B. R. Chopra), and the "historical" teleserial *Chanakya* (1991, directed by Chandraprakash Dwivedi). Together, these programs rewrote the narrative about Indian history and identity as not only predominantly "Hindu" but also valorizing upper-caste masculinity.[8] Significantly, from the 1970s onward, mainstream Hindi cinema also generated discourses on nationalism and gender.[9] All of these programs dovetailed nicely with the Hindu Right's own insistent narratives of a glorious "Hindu" past that was destroyed by rapacious "invaders," first "Muslim" (i.e., Turks, Afghans, and Arabs) and then "Christian" (i.e., the European colonists). More significantly, these programs were the first constituents of a representational archive from which, in the decades to follow, the Hindu Right freely drew its narratives and interpretations of the past and the present. In fact, because these narratives of a "glorious" Hindu past stood in painful contrast to the deeply impoverished present, they were often deliberately deployed to provoke a tense and combustible mixture of pride and humiliation.[10]

The arrival of satellite television in the 1990s transformed the broadcasting world in India still further. It not only facilitated the entry of several private

[8] Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[9] Karen Gabriel, *Melodrama and the Nation: The Sexual Economies of the Mainstream Bombay Cinema, 1970–2000* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2010); Tejaswini Niranjana, "Integrating Whose Nation? Tourists and Terrorists in 'Roja,'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 15, 1994, 79–80.

[10] These dynamics have been analyzed and commented on by several feminist scholars, as well as by scholars who do not necessarily identify as feminist but whose work has aided and buttressed that of the former. For the former, see Paola Bacchetta, *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 1994); Sikata Banerjee, "Armed Masculinity, Hindu Nationalism and Female Political Participation in India," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 62–83; Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar, eds., *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995); Tanika Sarkar, "Woman, Community and Nation: A Historical Trajectory for Hindu Identity Politics," in *Resisting the Sacred and the Secular: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Patricia Jeffrey and Amrita Basu (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 89–104. For the latter, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1992); Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays on Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), 233–53; Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). We will return to discuss the significance of these dynamics shortly; for now, we merely flag here the methodology, traditionally associated with the humanities, of analyzing narratives to explain the sociopolitics of the past and the present.

broadcasting firms (Indian and foreign), such as the Star Network, Zee Network, CNN, and Asianet, but also compelled the state-run public service broadcaster, Doordarshan, to turn aggressively commercial and even more entertainment based. The commercialization of television (and radio) went hand in hand with a dramatic increase in entertainment content (much of it feeding off Hindi and regional mainstream cinemas and to a smaller extent on Hollywood fare) and the proliferation of private channels. The combination of increasingly entertainment-based television programming with the increase in the number of channels and their reach and scale meant that, in less than three decades, many communities that had changed little since the days of the Raj in the rural hinterlands and at a glacial pace even in urban areas were exposed within the intimacy of their homes to images and narratives of peoples and places with radically different concepts, values, lifestyles, and identities.[11] These dynamics also contributed to the greatly accelerated growth of income inequality, however, resulting in steeper differences between the various social strata in the capacities, opportunities, and abilities to both earn and consume. Thus, although the scale and reach of the media had grown enormously, its concerns and preoccupations had shrunk commensurately: "Little or no space is devoted to issues related to how the other half of India[,] as distinct from the young urban middle-class[,] lives and dies in rural and urban India."[12]

These issues bring us to the third of the four developments we noted at the start, namely, the "economic reforms" of liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG), which were initiated in the mid-1980s and advanced with increasing zeal thereafter by each successive government. One consequence of these policies that has been of particular concern for feminist scholars and activists is the emergence of narratives that cast LPG as empowering for women. In fact,

[11] For the increase in entertainment-based television programming, see Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Sanjay Kachot, "Journey of Television Revolution," Press Information Bureau (Govt. of India), August 6, 2017, https://archive.pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=169686; Rajat Kathuria, Mansi Kedia, Richa Sekhani, and Kaushambi Bagchi, *Evaluating Spectrum Auctions in India* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, 2019), 8. A rough sense of how dramatic this change was can be garnered from a glance at the rate of change of literacy in India. According to the 1901 census, literacy in India stood at 5.4 percent. It took eight decades to climb by fewer than forty percentage points, to reach 43.57 percent, according to the 1981 census. But it climbed by almost thirty percentage points in just three decades after that, to reach 74.04 percent in the 2011 census. Rajkumar Singh, "Status of Indian Education System in Globalisation," *Journal of Globalization Studies* 8, no. 2 (November 2017): 124–31.

[12] Rommani Sen Shitak, "Television and Development Communication in India: A Critical Appraisal," *Global Media Journal—Indian Edition* 2, no. 2 (2011): 14, 15.

feminist analyses of the impact of LPG policies tend to be starkly divided.[13] One strongly held position is that women in India have been adversely affected by LPG in almost every aspect of their personal and social lives, albeit to differing degrees and extents. This view is usually located in the social sciences, especially economics, sociology, and development studies. However, the very insistence and consistency with which the argument against LPG is made indicate an uncomfortable awareness of how this impact could be read differently by other disciplines. For instance, feminist ethnographer Hemangini Gupta explores "the confluence of India's entry into neoliberal market privatization with resultant consumer citizenship practices, and their role in shaping contemporary middle-class feminism in India." She observes that "while a more mainstream feminism continues to appeal to legal reform and mass public protest as vehicles for protest, middle-class women formulating a neoliberal feminism assume individual responsibility to transform public spaces by emphasizing their personal desires and dreams as the basis for their articulation of feminist freedom."[14] In other words, LPG facilitated the emergence of a relatively new kind of feminism in the Indian context driven not so much by affiliation with or participation in a larger women's movement but by ideas of individual autonomy and personal achievement.

This unease with the advantages accruing from LPG to middle-class feminists is evident in economist Ashwini Deshpande's work as well. Referring to the impact of LPG on patterns of caste and gender oppression in particular, Deshpande writes that the "beneficiaries of the process of liberalization would predominantly be upper-class, upper-caste sections." Deshpande specifies that her analysis focuses "on two important definitions of identity in the Indian context, caste and gender," her premise being that "identity matters in the real world, even in strongly market-oriented situations."[15] The question that remains both unasked and unanswered here is, How did the discourse of identity under LPG suddenly become so prominent as to subsume the categories of gender,

[13] This division is evident as a recurrent and rather anxious theme in the proceedings of a conference titled "Globalization and the Women's Movement in India," organized by and held at the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in New Delhi in 2005. See CWDS, *Globalization and the Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: CWDS, 2016).

[14] Hemangini Gupta, "Taking Action: The Desiring Subjects of Neoliberal Feminism in India," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 2016): 153, 165.

[15] Ashwini Deshpande, "Overlapping Identities under Liberalization: Gender and Caste in India," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 55, no. 4 (2007): 749, 737.

caste, and even class into itself and thus become such a source of unease for the women's movement in India?

This takes us to the fourth development, the impact of the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, first announced in 1989. The Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission, set up in 1979 and headed by B. P. Mandal (hence the name Mandal Commission), made recommendations for affirmative action in the form of reserved quotas in education and employment to be implemented for the "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs). These recommendations, made in the commission's 1980 report, were held in abeyance by successive governments for fear of an upper-caste backlash till 1989, when the coalition government of V. P. Singh announced its implementation and was met, unsurprisingly, with a violent upper-caste backlash. Once implemented, however, its recommendations became impossible for any subsequent government to roll back, however great the pressure to do so from the upper and middle castes. The biggest deterrent was probably the size of the OBCs, the intended beneficiaries of the Mandal Commission's recommendations, who were estimated to be anywhere between 33 and 52 percent of the national population.[16]

How did the discourse of identity under liberalization, privatization, and globalization suddenly become so prominent as to subsume the categories of gender, caste, and even class . . . and thus become a source of unease for the women's movement in India?

The pertinent point for us here is that this entire process reformulated the significance of "caste" as a social, economic, and political category. The result was that the 1980s culminated in a violent fracturing of "Hindu" identity along caste lines. Of course, the fissures in upper-caste masculine hegemony that were laid bare in this violence have a much older history, but those earlier fissures had been contained by the state-promoted discourses of modernization and development that rode the wave of postcolonial nationalism, at least till the late 1970s. "Modernization" and "development" not only evoked aspirations across caste and class but also facilitated the increasing presence of middle and lower castes (not

[16] The actual quota for reservation recommended by the commission was only 27 percent for OBCs. Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran, "How Backward Are the Other Backward Classes? Changing Contours of Caste Disadvantage in India" (Working Paper No. 233, Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics, 2014), 6, http://www.cdedse.org/pdf/work233.pdf.

including Dalit and tribal communities, who were already the "beneficiaries" of a similar reservation policy from 1950) in the growing Indian middle class (i.e., in the formation of the national bourgeoisie).[17] Arguably, it was this integrative process of embourgeoisement—or, more specifically, of *aspirations* to embourgeoisement—that was interrupted by the Mandal Commission's findings. It was also interrupted and substantially reworked by the initiation of LPG policies in the 1990s, a point we shall return to later.

The commission's exhaustive study of the status of the middle and lower castes showed that even if the aspirations were common to all, it was the upper castes that had been the biggest beneficiaries of the processes of state-driven modernization and development. The integrative power of class formation through embourgeoisement was thus interrupted and substantially eroded by the public, indeed official, revelation of disparities along caste lines (and more extensively than with the communities of the Scheduled Castes [SCs] and Scheduled Tribes [STs] simply because of the size of the OBC communities).[18] The Mandal Commission's recommendation of an additional reserved quota of nearly 50 percent for the OBCs alone sought to empower these groups politically and administratively and thereby nullify or at least dilute the social power and privileges of the upper castes.

This dramatic transformation of the significance of caste and the conventional social dynamics by which it operated reflects the emergence into centrality of "issues of identity, representation and democracy."[19] The injection of LPG policies into the sociopolity strengthened these "issues" considerably, not least because of the impact they had on the process of embourgeoisement, a point flagged earlier. The earlier process of embourgeoisement had been the effect of a state-driven, postcolonial, and nationalist agenda of modernization and development. Once this was revealed as mainly benefiting the upper castes, the process of embourgeoisement itself split along caste lines: one part continued to be driven by the state, except that it was now statutorily in favor of the middle and lower castes, and the other adopted and sought to be driven by LPG policies,

[17] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); D. L. Sheth, "Secularisation of Caste and Making of New Middle Class," *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 21–September 3, 1999, 2502–10; Vijayan, *Gender and Hindu Nationalism*.

[18] It must be specified that "disparity" here refers only to quantity (i.e., the scale, spread, and extent of disparities with the upper castes) and not to quality (i.e., to the intensity of violence and exclusion experienced as disparity), which was and remains far greater for the SC/ST communities and often at the hands of the OBC communities.

[19] Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 191.

namely, the erstwhile beneficiaries of state largesse (i.e., the upper castes).[20]

These were the fissures that the neonationalist forces of the Hindu Right sought to contain. This containment was one of the main reasons for the almost frenzied mobilization these forces initiated to "reclaim" Ramjanmabhumi, the birthplace of Ram.[21] The aggressive, often violent, and intensely communal nationalism unleashed by the Hindu Right inexorably replaced the erstwhile, more secular, developmentalist nationalism of the state precisely because, under LPG, the state was ceding its developmentalist agenda to nonstate, private forces. Further, the processes of embourgeoisement allowed the discourse of nationalism to become less and less about development by the state and more and more about private investment in the nation, culminating, not surprisingly, in the recent "Make in India" campaign.[22] Perhaps more importantly, they allowed Hindutva as an ideology for the unification of "Hindu" identity and the idea of the "Hindu nation" to gain ground because it was continuously being linked to greater access to the new processes of embourgeoisement under LPG. Most significantly for our purpose, the Hindu Right also managed to make impressive inroads into the Indian women's movement through its own Hindutva women's movement.[23]

Without a doubt, these new processes did facilitate the emergence of new voices, issues, and identities that claimed the label "feminist," for example, Dalit feminism, Islamic feminism, the Hindutva women's organizations (which were actually careful to eschew the label "feminism" for being Western but which claimed to be working for the betterment of "Hindu" women anyway), and others, but this is precisely what has also led to the deep sense of unease in the women's movement in India, a point we shall return to later.[24] For now,

[20] The irony of rolling back the state at the very time when it was becoming accessible and available to the OBCs was noted (with undisguised contempt) by a leading right-wing columnist: "Over the next decade, Mandalism was made irrelevant by India's intelligent political class that decided co-option was better than confrontation. Today, they [the lower castes] are aggressively bidding competitively to expand the arena of job reservations, but it doesn't evoke a reaction because there are no *sarkari* [government] jobs going" (Chandan Mitra, "Why India Forgot a Hero," *Pioneer*, March 1, 2004, http://www.hvk.org/2004/0304/34.html).

[21] At that time occupied by the Babri Masjid, the mosque built by the Mughal emperor Babur allegedly after destroying a Ram temple that used to be located there. For a succinct account of the issue, see Shireen Ratnagar, "Archaeology at the Heart of a Political Confrontation," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (2004): 239–59.

[22] For more information on the "Make in India" campaign, see various articles carried by the *Economic Times* collated at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/newslist/3877788.cms (accessed December 3, 2021).

[23] Bacchetta, *Gender in the Hindu Nation*; Sarkar, "Woman, Community and Nation."

[24] On the label "feminist," see Madhu Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist," *Manushi* 61 (November–December 1990): 2–8.

we note the pressure to liberalize, privatize, and globalize especially the education sector and more specifically still higher education. This pressure was first manifested in the infamous Birla-Ambani report of 2000.[25] Since then there has been a slew of reports and studies from state and private sources that push the agenda of LPG in higher education.[26] This agenda has been increasingly put into practice in higher education planning and policies, especially with regard to its funding. With the state steadily decreasing the quantum of funds available for higher education, institutions and individuals have been forced to turn to private funding, with all the attendant strings and conditions attached.[27] It is in this historical, discursive, and political context that we locate our examination of the status of the humanities in order to understand its relationship to feminism in India in the last three decades.

Mapping the Field of the Humanities

In medieval Europe ca. 1400, the term "humanities" was a rubric for "the secular study of grammar, rhetoric, poetics, history, and moral philosophy, complementary to the *studia divinitatis*, or Biblical scholarship." With the increasing separation of church and state, by the eighteenth century this distinction from religious (i.e., biblical) studies had given way to a "strong conceptual division between a science of the human and a science of nature," a distinction that was based as much on a divergence in methodologies—qualitative analyses for the humanities, as opposed to quantitative ones for the natural sciences—as on the

[25] Mukesh Ambani and Kumarmangalam Birla, *Report on a Policy Framework for Reforms in Education* (New Delhi Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry, 2000). The report became infamous for its open advocacy of the privatization of higher education at a time when this was considered not just impossible but a political taboo.

[26] See, for instance, CRISIL Centre for Economic Research, *Skilling India: The Billion People Challenge* (Mumbai: CRISIL, 2010); National Knowledge Commission, *Report to the Nation, 2006–2009* (New Delhi: National Knowledge Commission, 2009); Pricewaterhouse Coopers Private Limited (PWC), *India—Higher Education Sector: Opportunities for Private Participation* (New Delhi: PWC, 2012); Ernst & Young and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), *Higher Education in India: Vision 2030* (Kolkata: Ernst & Young, 2013); Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), *Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan—National Higher Education Mission* (New Delhi: MHRD, 2013).

[27] Karen Gabriel, "Turning Right, Losing Rights: An Overview of Educational Reforms in the Modi Regime," in *Dismantling India: A 4-Year Report*, ed. John Dayal, Leena Dabiru, and Shabnam Hashmi (Delhi: Media House, 2018); P. K. Vijayan, "Privatising Minds: New Educational Policies in India," in *Academic Labour, Unemployment and Global Higher Education: Neoliberal Policies of Funding and Management*, ed. Suman Gupta, Jernej Habjan, and Hrvoje Tutek (New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 57–78.

object of study.[28] In the twentieth century these seemingly clear distinctions began to blur with the emergence of the social science disciplines. This blurring of boundaries was intensified by the introduction of quantitative methodologies in the humanities, especially in the emerging field of "digital humanities," from the late twentieth century onward.

These complexities and divergences in establishing—or at least clearly delineating—the field of the humanities are further exacerbated when examining how the field is constituted in the epistemologies and pedagogies of cultures and civilizations outside Europe. Through the history of the colonial encounter,[29] these divergent understandings were compelled not only into a confrontation with each other but also into a lengthy and as yet unfinished process of mutual assessment, evaluation, and critique (often leading to contradiction and contestation), as well as a quest for convergence, cohabitation, and sometimes even collaboration. The debates, discords, and dialogues that constituted this process continued well after Independence, shaping the conception of not only the humanities but education itself, especially higher education, the domain under consideration here.[30]

A noteworthy feature of higher education in India is that its current organizational predilections and its institutional structures have their roots in the British creation of a higher education infrastructure to cater to the empire's own demand for a "native" administrative class. The emphasis was on languages and the humanities, with little or no attention to what are today considered the social sciences. Conversely, "native" interest in science and technology was actively discouraged by the British. This registers the colonial intent of keeping the colonies scientifically and technologically dependent through knowledge starvation in these fields while ensuring that the limited humanities education they were fed served only to create docile, servile, and utilizable subjects.[31] This particular form and structure of a humanities-centered higher education persist-

[28] Rens Bod, Julia Kursell, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, "A New Field: History of Humanities," *History of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2016): 3.

[29] Bod et al., "A New Field," 3–5; D. Venkat Rao, ed., *Critical Humanities from India: Contexts, Issues, Futures* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[30] For the obvious reason that it is only when they enter higher education that students come to engage more autonomously and comprehensively with political and philosophical positions such as feminism, Marxism, socialism, nationalism, and so on.

[31] Preeti, "Colonial Codification of Education in India until 1920," *Journal of Indian Education* 42, no. 2 (2016): 29–44.

ed into the postcolonial educational order in India until the 1980s.[32]

A peculiar effect of this colonial structuring of education in India was that to this day the humanities remain tied to the social sciences under the rubric of the Arts in the sense of courses leading to a "Bachelor of Arts" (BA) or a "Master of Arts" (MA) degree.[33] We will return to discuss this shortly, but for now we note two different but related developments. The first of these is the explosion in private investment in higher education, particularly from the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, the *All India Survey of Higher Education, 2018–19* notes that nearly 80 percent of all enrollment in higher education is at the undergraduate level and that nearly 53 percent of these students continue to be in the arts and sciences, with more than 31 percent in the arts alone.[34] All the private higher education institutions were geared toward imparting professional and/or vocational education.[35] Students enrolling in the latter (whether in private or government higher education institutions) were rarely interested in and often were even actively discouraged from any kind of political participation. Students enrolling in the "general" (i.e., nonprofessional) arts and sciences higher education institutions, in contrast, were (rightly or wrongly) perceived to be more open to political ideas and political engagement.

The second related development is a realignment of the gendering of knowledge streams in higher education. From the 1980s onward, women's enrollment in higher education began to grow rapidly, accelerating even more from the 1990s. By 2018–19, out of a total of 37,399,388 enrolled students, 18,189,500—about 49 percent—were women.[36] Female enrollment picked up from 1990–91

[32] The only main exceptions to the emphasis on an arts-and-humanities-based higher education system during this period were the establishment of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). Pawan Agarwal, "Higher Education in India: Growth, Concerns and Change Agenda," *Higher Education Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2007): 198–99, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2007.00346.x.

[33] Although the Indian Council for Social Science Research was set up by the government in 1969, thereby acknowledging it to be distinct from the arts and/or humanities, the treatment of the social sciences as arts subjects continues. Interestingly and perhaps very tellingly, there is no equivalent body for the arts and humanities in India along the lines of, say, the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK.

[34] MHRD, *All India Survey of Higher Education, 2018–19* (New Delhi: MHRD, 2019), 9–10.

[35] Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Indian Higher Education Reform: From Half-Baked Socialism to Half-Baked Capitalism" (Working Paper No. 108, Center for International Development at Harvard University), 16, https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/42406326. In fact, Ashoka University, which claims to be the first private liberal arts university in India, was set up only in 2014. Olina Banerji, "Wide but Not Deep? Ashoka's 3-Year Liberal Arts Course Dilemma," *The Ken*, November 26, 2019, https://the-ken.com/story/wide-not-deep-ashoka-university/.

[36] MHRD, *All India Survey*, table 6, https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/AISHE%20Final%20Report%202018-19.pdf.

and accelerated from the next decade on, mapping almost exactly onto the period we are concerned with here.[37] In other words, this increase occurred at the same time as the four developments we identified at the beginning of this essay began to unfold. Like the growth of higher education in general, this gendered growth of enrollment was integrally shaped not just by the twin factors of politics and privatization noted above but very likely also by increasing communalism, casteism, and gender inequality.

According to a report by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, in the period 2014–15 to 2018–19, female participation was greater than male in the BA, BSc, BEd, BSc (Nursing), MA, MSc, and MCom programs.[38] In the BCom, BSc, and MBBS programs, the difference in participation is negligible enough to be considered even. However, female participation continues to be lower than male—sometimes quite substantially—in the BCA, BBA, BPharm, BTech, LLB, MBA, and MTech programs. The last set is constituted entirely of professional programs. This skew in gender distribution must be mapped onto another skew along the lines of gender distribution in the *kinds* of institutions of higher education: "Share of female students is lowest for Institutes of National Importance (23.93%) followed by Deemed Universities Government (33.56%) and State Private Universities (34.36%), whereas the share of female students for Institutes under State Legislative Act is 61.3%. Share of female students in State Public Universities is 50.09% and in Central Universities it is 47.37%."[39]

The gendered growth of higher education enrollment was shaped not just by the twin factors of politics and privatization . . . but very likely also by increasing communalism, casteism, and gender inequality.

From the above data, it becomes clear that the vast majority of female students tend to be found in the arts. There are several factors at work here: "Expenditure on higher education increases with household income; is higher if the student is a male, is pursuing postgraduate education compared to vocational education and

[37] Pankaj Mittal, Shri Subhash Chandra, and Diksha Rajput, eds., *Higher Education: All India and States Profile, 2017–18* (New Delhi: University Grants Commission [UGC], 2018).

[38] MHRD, *All India Survey*, 40. In the abbreviations used here, part of the higher education parlance in India, the initials "B" and "M" refer to Bachelor's and Master's degree programs, respectively, whereas "A" stands for Arts, "Sc" for Science, "Com" for Commerce, "CA" for Computer Applications, "BA" for Business Administration, "Pharm" for Pharmacy, and "Tech" for Technology. "MBBS" is Bachelor of Medicine Bachelor of Surgery and "LLB" stands for Legum Baccalaureus, or a Bachelor of Law.

[39] MHRD, *All India Survey*, 24.

if the institution attending is private (aided/unaided) over government institutions."[40] Of immediate concern for us, however, is what follows from the above, namely, that female participation in higher education therefore has throughout been more closely bound to the arts and sciences and especially to the arts (i.e., the humanities) and to government rather than private institutions of higher education. Evidently, then, the "feminization" of these professions permitted the reconciliation of (Hindutva) constructions of tradition and modernity along gender lines.

The understanding of feminization here is obviously in the very limited sense of an activity undertaken predominantly, if not solely, by women.[41] If we review the data for the arts in particular, the number of male students is only marginally less than the number of female students, so this sense of feminization does not apply here directly. A case can be made for an *indirect* application of the term to the arts, since the much lower numerical strength of female students in the professional disciplines (other than the BEd, BSc Nursing, and MBBS) suggests a masculinization of those fields and, conversely, an *implied* feminization of all other fields, including the humanities. But given the fact that the male-female ratio is fairly even in these other fields, the implied feminization would have to rely not on the numbers of males and females but on the *meanings of masculinity and femininity*. Given the difficulties of making clear, sex-based characterization of gender, we can legitimately speak of feminization in this instance only if either some other basis, besides numbers, for the dominance of femininity (i.e., feminization) can be discerned or, regardless of such dominance (or lack thereof), there is a discernible advantage to understanding either feminization or the humanities or both through such a linking of the two.

We began this section by identifying some of the disciplines that were commonly identified as the humanities in medieval Europe. The peculiar problem of mapping the humanities in India was noted by the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), Bangalore, in its 2010 report, which states that "till the 1980s, the currency of the terms 'humanities' and 'social sciences' within the regular university system was limited. Most disciplines that are grouped together under the humanities and the social sciences today were loosely referred to as the 'arts.' So, the universities offered students a choice between the 'science' and

[40] P. Duraisamy and Malathy Duraisamy, "Contemporary Issues in Indian Higher Education: Privatization, Public and Household Expenditures and Student Loan," *Higher Education for the Future* 3, no. 2 (2016): 154.

[41] Probably used first by Diana Pearce in her study of the "feminization of poverty." Diana Pearce, "The Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work and Welfare," in "Women and Work," special issue, *Urban and Social Change Review* 11 (1978): 28–36.

the 'arts' streams." In a footnote, the report adds that "the humanities need to be defined broadly to include the social sciences" and goes on to say that "a precise, objective definition of what disciplines constitute the arts and humanities in India is impossible. Rather than consider the lack of clarity as a hindrance, the report views it as a creative porousness that has enriched the arts and humanities by introducing methodological pluralism and a plethora of perspectives and approaches widely recognized as the markers of advanced research worldwide."[42] The report consistently refers to all three—the arts, humanities, and social sciences—as a package; in its understanding there is really nothing to distinguish the arts and the humanities from the social sciences in India.

This eclecticism to the point of confusion is facilitated and nourished by several factors (apart from its enthusiastic passing off as postmodernism). The first and perhaps most significant is the institutional and discursive tendency to treat the arts and the humanities as synonymous. This has its roots in medieval European academe: "In the medieval university curriculum the arts ('the seven arts' and later 'the liberal … arts') were grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy." Raymond Williams also notes the "original general meaning of art, to refer to any kind of skill"; the term "artist" was used to refer to any such skilled person, as well as to "a practitioner of one of the arts … presided over by the seven muses: history, poetry, comedy, tragedy, music, dancing, astronomy" until the late sixteenth century. From the seventeenth century, these arts were separated under the head "artisan," and a new term emerged to refer specifically to the representational arts, namely, "fine arts": "This development of **artisan**, and the mC19 [mid-nineteenth-century] definition of *scientist*, allowed the specialization of **artist** and the distinction not now of the *liberal* but of the **fine arts**."[43] If we further note that the first Bachelor's degree in science was awarded in 1860 by the University of London,[44] the paring down of the arts as an institutional category to the humanities becomes clear. In the process, the arts degree, originally "regarded as the certificate of the teacher or as evidence of fitness for the advanced studies … gradually lost its original character and became … a final degree for those wishing a general education."[45]

Through the history of imperialism and colonialism, these dynamics were

[42] India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), *Arts and Humanities Research Mapping, India* (Bangalore: IFA, 2010), 3, 4.

[43] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 9–10 (italics and boldface in the original).

[44] Francis Michael Glenn Willson, *The University of London, 1858–1900: The Politics of Senate and Convocation* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004), 5.

[45] Philip L. Harriman, "The Bachelor's Degree," *Journal of Higher Education* 7, no. 6 (1936): 301–2.

imported into and therefore became constitutive of Indian higher education,[46] especially in the framing of eligibility criteria for government appointments. The BA degree thus entered Indian higher education with the original conception of the humanities having little substantial bearing on its purpose, utility, or social relevance. In an important policy document, *Education and National Development: Report of the Education Commission, 1964–66*, better known as the Kothari Commission report after its chairperson, D. S. Kothari, we see not only a continuation of this diminished sense of the BA but also a significant shift in emphasis: "At present, the intelligentsia consists predominantly of the white-collar professions and students of the humanities, while the proportion of scientists and technical workers in its ranks is quite small. To change this, greater emphasis must be placed, as we have argued earlier, on vocational subjects, science education and research."[47] Perhaps in keeping with this new emphasis, the 1990 *Report of the UGC* [University Grants Commission] *Committee towards New Educational Management*, also known as the Gnanam Committee Report after its chairperson, A. Gnanam, barely mentions the humanities at all.[48] Things did not change much over the next two decades either. In a 2008 UGC report, also known as the Thorat report after the then UGC chairperson, Sukhadeo Thorat, the humanities continue to be marginalized, with barely seven mentions in nearly three hundred pages.[49]

The Thorat report does, however, make an observation that is of some significance for us: it notes that because of "societal biases … women are disproportionately represented in what can be termed as 'soft options'—humanities as compared to sciences and other technical fields such as engineering and so on."[50] It does not elaborate on what those "societal biases" are or why they affect the gendered distribution of students across disciplines. Neither is the report actually accurate, going by the fairly even numbers of male and female students in the arts and the sciences (as noted earlier). Nevertheless—in fact, *because* it is inaccurate—this observation captures a gendered perception of the humanities—a feminization of the humanities—that is not derived (solely) from the numerical strength of women in it. Rather, by linking "societal biases" with "soft options"

[46] See Rao, *Critical Humanities from India*, for a more detailed discussion of this dynamic.

[47] D. S. Kothari et al., *Education and National Development: Report of the Education Commission, 1964–66* (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, 1966), 27.

[48] UGC, *Report of the UGC Committee towards New Educational Management* (New Delhi: UGC, 1990).

[49] UGC, *Higher Education in India: Issues Related to Expansion, Inclusiveness, Quality and Finance* (New Delhi: UGC, 2008).

[50] UGC, *Higher Education in India*, 95.

and the humanities, the Thorat report suggests that the humanities are "soft" disciplines "as compared to sciences and other technical fields" and that women prefer and/or are encouraged and/or coerced to choose these soft options. These two suggestions tacitly explain each other: the humanities are "soft" because women prefer them; women prefer them because the humanities are "soft." This is the sense in which the feminization of the humanities works, even in the absence of numbers, as an unacknowledged influence of societal gender biases—prejudiced perceptions, interpretations, understandings, beliefs, and values—on the structure and organization of higher education institutions. Recall here the fact that some of the major issues engaged with by the women's movement in India—the Shah Bano case, the Roop Kanwar case, the rise of right-wing women's movements—occurred at the same time as this jump in the enrollment of women in higher education and, therefore, at the same time as the emergence of this form of the feminization of the humanities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But our examination of the complex relationships between these developments will be addressed in the next section.

The feminization of the humanities works, even in the absence of numbers, as an unacknowledged influence of societal gender biases . . . on the structure and organization of higher education institutions.

Finally, in the 2020s we find some significant changes in the understanding of higher education and in the shaping of its policies. Although the humanities feature more prominently in the National Education Policy (NEP) report of 2020, they are mostly treated as an addendum to the sciences. The report issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development notes that there will be "no hard separations between arts and sciences, between curricular and extra-curricular activities, between vocational and academic streams, etc., in order to eliminate harmful hierarchies among, and silos between different areas of learning." In effect, the report promotes a curriculum that is science based but with a mandatory garnishing of the arts for what purports to be a "liberal arts education." As the NEP document states, "The very idea that all branches of creative human endeavour, including mathematics, science, vocational subjects, professional subjects, and soft skills should be considered 'arts,' has distinctly Indian origins. This notion of a 'knowledge of many arts' or what in modern times is often called the 'liberal arts' (i.e., a liberal notion of the arts) must be brought back to Indian education,

as it is exactly the kind of education that will be required for the 21st century."[51]

This understanding of the arts as being inclusive of "all branches" of knowledge, including the sciences and vocational subjects, suggests an even more fundamental (albeit tacit) understanding that the humanities are necessary only as an "add-on" to the sciences and not independently. Furthermore, the report links this understanding to a putative national past when such a "liberal" notion of education purportedly prevailed, thereby revealing its nationalist-chauvinist agenda, too. While we do not have the space to fully discuss the portent and implications of this agenda for the humanities in Indian higher education, it certainly has an important bearing on the gendered understanding of the humanities that was already in evidence in the Thorat report in 2008 and still prevails.

Mapping Feminist Domains

There are important distinctions between some significant categories that can and often do blur into each other, specifically, "feminism," "feminist," "gender studies," "women's studies," and "women's movement." Ann Curthoys writes, "Feminism is an 'advocacy of the rights of women.' While the term emerged in the 1890s in the context of a lively women's movement, it is now used to describe pro-women ideas and actions from ancient times to the present."[52] However, employing the intersectional modus that has long characterized much of feminist writing in India, Rekha Pande argues that

> feminism is not merely a concern for "women's issues" but also a way of understanding power and critiquing the domination/subordination dynamic that is central to so much of modern life. The roots of that dynamic are in patriarchy, the system of male dominance that arose only a few thousand years ago but that has been so destructive to people and the earth. Patriarchy is incompatible with justice and sustainability. The challenge for feminism is to articulate an alternative to the illegitimate hierarchies that structure our lives: men over women, white over non-white, rich over poor, First World over Third.[53]

[51] MHRD, *National Education Policy 2020* (New Delhi: MHRD, 2020), 5, 36, https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.

[52] Ann Curthoys, "Feminism," in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, ed. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 128.

[53] Rekha Pande, "Challenges to Feminism in 21st Century: A South Asian Perspective, with Special Focus on India," *Revista Ártemis* 17, no. 1 (2014): 4.

Significantly, several scholars trace the roots of feminism in India to the great nineteenth-century social reform movements that successfully campaigned to have the colonial state ban *sati*, raise the age of consent for marriage, and promote widow remarriage, for instance.[54] Yet these demands for reform also revealed tensions and divergences within these movements arising from the need to treat women as a "seamless constituency" while at the same time acknowledging their differential bodily capacities and vulnerabilities. However, the sharpest breaks in conceptualizing "a seamless constituency called 'women'" were to emerge more than two decades after Independence, especially along caste and communal lines.[55]

An important point of entry into an understanding of the trajectories of feminism in India is the 1970s, when "women's issues slowly began gaining public recognition and a space of their own."[56] In the early decades after Independence, some influential women's organizations were formed, such as the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) and the Shramik Mahila Sangathana (Working Women's Organization). "In 1973–74, Maoist women formed the Progressive Organization of Women, initiating a self-consciously feminist critique of radical leftist politics along with an overarching analysis of gender oppression," followed by "the first major celebration of March 8 as International Women's Day in 1975" and culminating in the Samyukta Stri Mukti Sangarsha Parishad (literally, United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference) in October 1975. The first organization of women workers, called the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), was formed in 1974, affirming the trade union activism that marked the 1970s. "This period saw the rise of many autonomous groups with different agendas and issues. Some of the common issues included the division of housework, party politics, rape, and dowry deaths. The issues of violence, popularly called atrocities against women, became the centrepiece of the movement in the early eighties and the cause for the move-

[54] Padma Anagol, "Feminist Inheritances and Foremothers: The Beginnings of Feminism in Modern India," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 523–46; Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Feminism," in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*, ed. Gita Dharampal-Frick, Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, Rachel Dwyer, and Jahnavi Phalkey (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 83–86; Mary E. John, ed., *Women's Studies in India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008); Rochona Majumdar, "Arguments within Indian Feminism," *Social History* 32, no. 4 (2007): 434–45; Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "English Literary Studies, Women's Studies and Feminism in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 25, 2008, 66–71; Tanika Sarkar, "Rhetoric against Age of Consent: Resisting Colonial Reason and Death of a Child-Wife," *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 4, 1993, 1869–78.

[55] Majumdar, "Arguments," 440–41.

[56] John, *Women's Studies in India*, 4.

ment's expansion."[57] The publication of *Towards Equality* (1975), commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare in 1971 via the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), played a major role in highlighting many of these issues, the general deterioration in the condition of women since the 1950s, and the issue of the decline in concern for women's issues in the two preceding decades.[58]

The 1970s thus saw the emergence of multiple voices and political agendas in the women's movement in India, with the starkest divisions being along caste and class lines, which in turn mapped onto divisions along the lines of location (rural/urban, as well as, more metaphorically, "Western"/"Indian"); language (English / Hindi / regional languages and dialects); education (literate/illiterate, school and college educated / uneducated); and occupation (academic / activist / intellectual / worker / peasant / housewife / sex worker / politician). Traditionally, the leadership—and, some would argue, the main constituents—of the women's movement in India had been from urban, English-educated, upper-caste, upper- and middle-class women. Though they continued (and continue) to retain a hegemonic hold on the movement, these divisions have been challenging that hegemony with increasing effectiveness. From the late 1970s onward, further divisions along the lines of religion (Hindu/Muslim/Christian/Buddhist), which continued to map onto these earlier divisions, became increasingly evident, and starkly so. Thus, for instance, the women's wing of the RSS, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, is supposed to have gained a pan-India presence by the late 1970s. The secular foundations of the Indian women's movement have been put under pressure by this development in particular.

The *Towards Equality* report, of course, does not engage with the divisions in the women's movement, primarily because it is a government document aimed at shaping governmental policies. One consequence of the focus on policymaking was, however, that "women's rights became articulated within a state-led reform agenda, reinscribing the concerns of national integrity, modernity, and progress."[59] Another consequence, perhaps with longer-term ramifications, was that the state's centrality to the agenda of women's rights meant that changes in and to the state inevitably affected the women's movement. This means that the four significant processes that we identified in the first section (communalism, the expansion of the electronic media, LPG, and the consequences of the Mandal

[57] Rekha Pande, "The History of Feminism and Doing Gender in India," *Revista Estudos Feministas* 26, no. 3 (2018): 8.

[58] Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (New Delhi: Department of Social Welfare, 1975).

[59] Pande, "The History of Feminism," 8.

Commission report) had a major impact on the women's movement, serving to amplify and exacerbate the divides within it. We will now detail some of these divides and their implications for feminist thinking.

One important result of these increasing divides, especially the communal, caste, and class divides, was that the use of the term "feminism" as an appropriate descriptor of its ideology/ies and politics was challenged from within the women's movement itself. Madhu Kishwar, for instance, felt that the term was too infused by its Western origins to be of relevance in India.[60] By the 1990s it had become an ideological legacy that haunted (and continues to haunt) the subsequent divisions in the movement and tests them with questions of "authenticity." The question that we had raised earlier is pertinent here again: How did the discourse of identity suddenly become prominent under LPG as to subsume the categories of gender, caste, and even class into itself and thus become such a source of unease for the women's movement in India? What follows is an attempt to answer this question.

The state's centrality to the agenda of women's rights meant that changes in and to the state inevitably affected the women's movement.

In the Indian case, the underlying conceptual differences regarding feminism often refer to and invoke social, cultural, economic, and geographical determinants that are specific to India, even though they may share several of the concerns, preoccupations, and difficulties of feminisms in the West. On the question of religion, for instance, "there is a noticeable reluctance even among secular progressives in India, including feminists (perhaps especially them), to be confrontationist where religion is concerned; and as for re-deploying religious imagery, there is always a certain uneasiness that attends its politics. For these reasons, among others, the centrality of western feminism's critique of 'images of women' was not exactly reproduced in the Indian context."[61] However, these differences do not imply the automatic invalidity of all Western feminist concepts and understandings (such as they are). Further, if the rejection of these concepts (even in the legitimate case of those that may not be applicable to the Indian context) is based on a politics of indigenism/nativism, then its concern is less with questions of patriarchy, gender, sexuality, women's oppression, exploitation, empowerment, and liberation—all the issues that feminisms of various hues have spoken and acted on—and more with the "Indianness" of

[60] Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call."
[61] Rajan, "English Literary Studies," 68.

those questions (i.e., drawing in the dynamics of identity politics). Thus, even as it claims the right to speak and act on those very questions (of patriarchy, women's oppression, etc.), feminism's priorities are shaped by the identity politics of indigenism, chauvinism, and nationalism, with which it usually dovetails very easily.

Even in the Indian case, however, the divisions are not always derived from a politics of authenticity based on identitarian and chauvinistic constructions of religion, region, caste, and language, for instance. Divergences in conceptualizing, understanding, and strategizing even commonly agreed upon substantial issues have been divisive for the women's movement. The Uniform Civil Code, or how to understand violence and/or agency in sex work, or the issues around sex speech, or the space for alternative sexualities, or the vexed issue of surrogacy—these and other questions remain unresolved from the point of view of finding common ground to campaign from, to fight from. These differences have on occasion morphed into another kind of politics of authenticity, one that raises the question of an "authentic feminism." The discourse of authenticity here very easily maps onto the discourse of authenticity inherent to the identity politics of indigenism/nativism. Then, resistance to the term "feminism" and to what it designates is not just a nomenclatural resistance but a discursive and political one as well.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri observes that "feminism in twenty-first century India is … challenged by two forces: first, from a patriarchy that defends honour killing on grounds of cultural rights; second, from a neoliberal vision, which deifies the economy and demonizes collective and emancipative politics. Often both sets of views emerge from the same factions."[62] In the aftermath of the Shah Bano case, Indian feminism of the 1990s was marked by "a period of withdrawal from the protest agenda of the earlier decade, into introspection, consolidation, and new directions."[63] The result was the emergence of a third challenge, which became evident in the two consequences we noted above, namely, in the resistance to and even rejection of any discourse, politics, or program that self-identified as feminist and, just as significantly, in the almost embarrassed subsumption and/or relegation of feminism to little more than an academic exercise undertaken within the quarantined domains of gender studies and women's studies. The challenge of being straitjacketed and ghettoized, both institutionally and as a field of knowledge, and the consequent diminishing as a practice present a

[62] Chaudhuri, "Feminism," 85.

[63] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 31.

genuine danger of feminism losing cohesion, direction, orientation, and energy as a political project. This has been exacerbated by the steady cuts in funding to women's studies departments and institutes.[64]

The problem is compounded by the fact that much of what we call feminist thought in India took shape, as noted earlier, in the context of women's studies programs and the women's movement here. Women's studies as a field first emerged in the 1970s at the convergence of various initiatives of the state (via the UGC and the Ministry of Women's Development), the women's movement (with its radical reformism), and specific higher education institutions, departments, and colleges (such as the SNDT Women's University in Maharashtra). Recognizing the complexity of women's lives, the intersections of gender, caste, class, sexual choice, nationalism, race, ability, and so on, women's studies have typically employed the intersectional method of analysis.[65] With the publication of the *Towards Equality* report, the need for a multipronged program of action was acknowledged. The close ties of the women's movement with the Indian

[64] Ashmita Sharma, "Why Women's Studies? Contemporary Relevance and Future Discourse," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 27, 2017, https://www.epw.in/journal/2017/21/web-exclusives/why-womens-studies.html; Anoo Bhuyan, "New UGC Guidelines May Cut Funding for Women's Studies Centres across India," *The Wire*, March 19, 2019, https://thewire.in/education/new-ugc-guidelines-may-cut-funding-for-womens-studies-centres-across-india.

[65] See, for instance, the following studies, which examine the intersections between caste, class, and gender: Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14–21, 1995, 2548–50; Gopal Guru, "Shifting Categories in the Discourse on Caste and Class," *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 19, 2016, 21–25; Sharmila Rege, J. Devika, Kalpana Kannabiran, Mary E. John, Padmini Swaminathan, and Samita Sen, "Intersections of Gender and Caste," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 4, 2013, 35–36; Rege, *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006); Vibhuti Patel, "Dynamics of Women's Studies and Women's Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 14–20, 2010, 35–37; Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1996); Karen Gabriel, *Melodrama and the Nation: Sexual Economies of Bombay Cinema 1970–2000* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2010); Mangala Subramaniam and Preethi Krishnan, "Stranded between Law, Family and Society: Women in Domestic Violence and Rulings of India's Supreme Court," *Current Sociology* 64, no. 4 (2016): 603–19; Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar, *Women and Right Wing Movements: Indian Experiences* (London: Zed Books, 1995); Pratiksha Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ratna Kapur, *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020); Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Janaki Nair and Mary E. John, eds., *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publications, 1993); Nivedita Menon, *Seeing Like a Feminist* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2012); Sangari, "Politics of Diversity"; Shubhangi Vaidya, "Dis(ability), Gender and Identity: Crossing Boundaries," in *Women's and Gender Studies in India: Crossings*, ed. Anu Aneja (New York: Routledge, 2019); and Smita Patil, "Revitalising Dalit Feminism: Towards Reflexive, Anti-caste Agency of Mang and Mahar Women in Maharashtra," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 4, 2013, 37–43.

state's own agendas, as well as its financial dependence on the latter, have meant that the power of feminism in India to function as a transformative political force has been largely circumscribed by this bond. This is not to suggest that feminism must always be antistate in order to be transformative but merely to point out that feminism's transformative powers are less evident in the wider field of cultural practice than in academe or in government policies. And as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes, "Few would question the position that 'culture'—the complex of language, religion, customs, morals, manners, art, aesthetics, and everyday practices—crucially defines the position of women, the relation of the sexes, sexual practices, kinship structures, marriage, and patriarchy in every society, or suggest that it is not grounded in the material aspects of social life."[66]

The challenge of being strait-jacketed and ghettoized, both institutionally and as a field of knowledge, and the consequent diminishing as a practice present a genuine danger of feminism losing cohesion, direction, orientation, and energy as a political project.

This problem arises at least partly because feminism is neither *just* academic practice nor *just* political practice but both, and these two undertakings are vital to the larger project of pursuing and ensuring women's empowerment and gender equity and equality, as well as the rights and dignity of gender and sexual minorities. Relations between different aspects of this project can be complex, layered, sometimes even contradictory, and this may be understood as another aspect of the same problem because of the seemingly inescapable pull of identity politics as the modular framework for shaping the conceptions and discussions of this project. The task before feminism in India, then, is not just to knit together these two undertakings but to do so without getting drawn into that framework. The humanities, or "the arts," can play a significant role in that process.

[66] Rajan, "English Literary Studies," 69.

Mapping the Dynamic: Toward a Feminist Humanities

From the discussion above, we can identify the following issues and future directions. First, a revised understanding of humanities is required both conceptually and in terms of policies and practices. The institutional understanding of the humanities as embodied in the arts has not only contributed to the ghettoization and marginalization of both the humanities and feminism but also sought to confine feminism itself to an academic practice within the arts (i.e., the humanities and social sciences).[67] In other words, feminism has become incarcerated within the confines of a postcolonial institutional epistemology of the humanities that is designed to deliver degrees toward employment rather than toward an actual engagement with the humanities. The field of women's studies has traditionally practiced the infusion of feminism into the humanities.[68] However, for a truly feminist conception of the humanities to emerge, the humanities have to be overhauled in their entirety to allow feminist perspectives, analytical and methodological frameworks, concepts, epistemologies, and politics to infuse the humanities—to render them truly *human*.[69]

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Second, the engagement of feminist perspectives, frameworks, and concepts with the social and political forces and structures of the present must eschew any tendencies toward homogenization, exclusivism, or identity-centered politics.[70] One way in which this can be attempted, if not accomplished, is by shifting from a politics of representation as representativeness to a politics of solidarity/ies built around specific issues and programs. The social profile of the women's movement—certainly its leadership and especially in urban areas—was and

[67] Patel, "Dynamics of Women's Studies"; Rekha Pappu, "Constituting a Field: Women's Studies in Higher Education," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 9, no. 2 (2002): 221–34.

[68] John, *Women's Studies in India*; Aneja, *Women's and Gender Studies*.

[69] See Neera Desai, "Reflecting Back, Forging Ahead: Issues before Women's Studies," in *Between Tradition, Counter-tradition and Heresy: Essays in Honour of Veena Mazumdar*, ed. Lotika Sarkar, Kumud Sharma, and Leela Kasturi (New Delhi: Rainbow Publications, 2002); Maithreyi Krishnaraj, "Blazing a Quarter Century Trail: Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT University," in *Narratives from the Women's Studies Family*, ed. Devaki Jain and Pam Rajput (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), 81–114. See the essays in John, *Women's Studies in India*, for elaborations of this argument.

[70] Desai, "Reflecting Back."

remains strongly upper caste and middle and upper class.[71] While this helped (and continues to help) maintain proximity to the state, it was also a source of tension, since the women who embraced the Western feminist label were almost always from that social strata.[72] In a political system that was a representative electoral democracy, the pull of the politics of identity and representativeness was inexorable, which was one of the main reasons for the emergence of breakaway movements such as the Dalit women's movement and Dalit feminism.

In a political system that was a representative electoral democracy, the pull of the politics of identity and representativeness was inexorable, which was one of the main reasons for the emergence of breakaway movements such as the Dalit women's movement and Dalit feminism.

Third but more pertinently for our purposes, there is a need to review our understanding of "representation" itself. Rajan defines it thus: "Representation is … the dynamic process whereby the forces of reform, regulation, and ideological self-fashioning 'recast' women through a variety of textually encoded forms such as law, religious texts, myth and legend, conduct books, manuals, theatre and oral performances, devotional songs, sermons, and popular literature. Any and all of these cultural texts therefore invite critical reading, interpretation and recuperation." She goes on to add, "Representation clearly was not a matter limited to the text's content or interpretation alone, but involved power, regulation and the policing of discursive boundaries."[73] This serves as a useful point to initiate the review. The confluence of feminism and the humanities can play a major role as the site for undertaking such a recalibration of representation and representativeness. It can not only recast the humanities in the light of this reviewed understanding but also recast the issues and programs that must be the core concerns of feminism and the women's movements in India. This confluence will necessarily be a dialogic one that can and must consciously and deliberately allow itself to become the basis for the formulation of more explicitly inclusive principles of political solidarity, and the recasting of the humanities and social sciences can contribute significantly to the making of those solidarities.

[71] See also Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Women and Society in India* (Bombay: Ajanta, 1987), 7.

[72] Karen Gabriel and Prem Kumar Vijayan, "Whose State Is It Anyway? Reservation, Representation, Caste, and Power," in *B. R. Ambedkar: The Quest for Justice*, ed. Aakash Singh Rathore (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020), 169–96.

[73] Rajan, "English Literary Studies," 69, 70.

This is, of course, an ambitious agenda, almost a revolutionary one, requiring an overhaul of the humanities and the social sciences as much as of feminism and the women's movement. Leaving aside the social and political resistance to this, the institutional resistance alone would be formidable. However, one can conceive of smaller, more achievable beginnings that can and must be made. For instance, key issues and concerns of the women's movement can be addressed by raising questions about their representation and their representativeness, as well as the relationship between the two, for feminism and for the movement. This will simultaneously pose the question of which field—the humanities or the social sciences or an interdisciplinary one—would serve the purpose of addressing these questions best. A specific instance of this could be the question of violence against women (VAW), which was an early preoccupation of the women's movement and continues to be so.[74] Several questions can be raised, such as:

1. How is VAW represented in the media, in political discourse, in jurisprudential and legal terms, in religion, and in everyday social relations? What are the representational differences between sex-based and gender-based VAW?
2. Can any of the varieties and kinds of VAW be seen as representative of all VAW? What purpose—ideological, political, administrative, legal—could such a representativeness serve? Could this purpose serve a feminist agenda or advance the women's movement in any way?
3. What are the respective advantages for feminism and the women's movement of drawing on the humanities (e.g., philosophy, psychology, history, literature) and the social sciences (e.g., economics, sociology, anthropology, political science) to analyze representation and representativeness?
4. Can VAW be made a central concern of pedagogy for the entirety of the humanities and social sciences and not just women's studies and/or gender studies? To what extent will this affect the two fields and in what ways?
5. To what extent will such analyses aid and further the work being done to eradicate VAW?

There are probably several more questions, but these are enough to illustrate the argument being made here. Each of these questions is large enough to require independent study. This list must serve merely as an example of a roadmap for a short stretch of a much larger agenda.

Finally, a major new frontier of the humanities that seems to be gaining in

[74] Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992).

both popularity and funding is the emerging field of digital humanities (DH). There is certainly much to be said for the quantitative methods and methodologies that DH brings to the humanities. For instance, it opens up prospects for exploring representation not just in terms of Rajan's understanding (referred to above) but also in the more political sense of the calculable constituencies of the usage of terms (i.e., their prevalence, absence, marginality, etc.). That said, two caveats need to be put forward. First, there is a genuine apprehension that the DH tendency is more interested in giving the humanities a respectable "scientific" basis to counter the half-imagined slights of being a less than valid—or, at least, less than useful—field of human knowledge. Such an underlying impulse will pull the humanities into an even more gendered relationship with the field of the sciences, in which it will always be seen as validating itself on borrowed principles, with no methodological and epistemological grounding of its own. We believe that the confluence of feminism and the humanities can provide such a grounding, in addition to employing the methods and methodologies of DH to analyze the implications of this grounding, in ways that can substantially enhance the claims of DH itself.

The second caveat is that, however rigorous the methods and methodologies of DH, they cannot replace the more complex political, analytical, and programmatic frameworks that are and must be integral to a feminist humanities. The feminist slogan "the personal is political" remains a potent and unfulfilled project, and while DH has the potential to undo this project completely, it also has the potential to enhance it considerably. For instance, in emerging studies of the worlds of social media, where digital persons are fashioned and erased in unprecedented ways, feminist agendas have taken shape in the form of both resistances and constructions that women around the world are finding profoundly enabling, the #MeToo movement being a case in point. Which of these two directions will finally prevail depends to a substantial extent on how deeply the humanities can become feminist.

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