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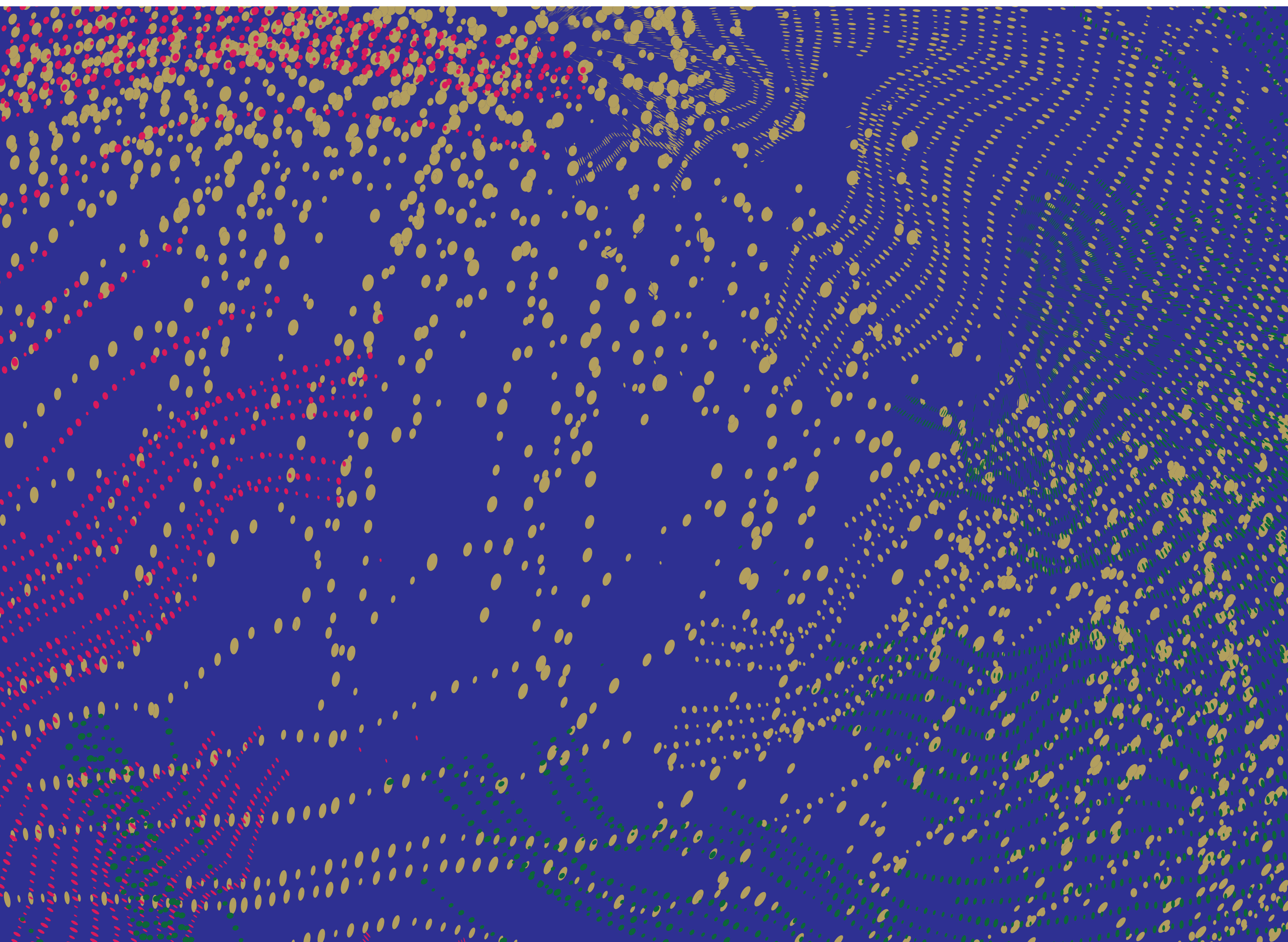

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From the "Indian Women's Movement" to "Intersectional Feminists": Humanities Categories in Indian Feminism

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In October 2017, as the tides of the now global #MeToo movement surged, the world of Indian academia was thrown into turmoil when Raya Sarkar, a Dalit feminist law student, published a crowd-sourced "List of Sexual Harassers in Academia" on social media. This list included several renowned Indian male scholars in locations across the world. Many hailed the publication of the list as a creative moment within the #MeToo movement, shifting the public gaze from the survivor to the perpetrator, and as an extension of the common practice of using whisper networks to warn other women of the predatory tendencies of powerful men. Others criticized the list as a mechanism that did not follow due process. They argued that it was open to misuse and criticized the politics of naming and shaming that the strategy entailed. These critical reactions, however, appeared to correspond to the caste identity of those responding. Feminists who reacted by criticizing the lack of due process were largely upper caste and seen to be closing ranks to protect *their* men, and feminists who supported the publication of the list on social media identified as and allied themselves with Dalit[1] and other marginalized identities.

Throughout the history of feminist activism in India, cleavages within feminist groups have often occurred along caste lines. In the case of Sarkar's list, it led to the "due process brigade" being characterized as Savarna (upper-caste) feminists and the "pro-list brigade" as Dalit feminists.[2] Others characterized

[1] The term Dalit is used to refer to people who traditionally occupied the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. They are also referred to as untouchables, Adi Dravidas, or, in Gandhi's coinage, Harijans. The word Dalit is used to self-identify and subvert the shame associated with belonging to these castes. Its earliest use is commonly traced to Jyotirao Phule, who in the nineteenth century worked tirelessly, along with his wife, Savitribai Phule, to educate Dalit women.

[2] Maranatha Wahlang and Gitanjali Joshua, "The Sexual Violence Hall of Fame—A Collision of 'Who Politically Represents the Margins' and 'Sexual Harassment,'" paper presented at the 25th European Conference of South Asian Studies, Paris, France, July 24–27, 2018.

the two camps as "elite" versus "intersectional" feminists. Neither of these categories was new or indeed completely unwarranted; they are both part of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and construction and critique that are a part of any discourse. However, in this context their emergence serves to illustrate the purpose of this essay: to map the journey of feminist categories between and across such locations as the university, media, and activist spaces. In this instance, reactions to the #MeToo list implicate all three locations in a single event.

The feminist movement in India, as in the rest of the world, has emerged as a bricolage of practices, critiques, convergences, and divergences, constantly engaged with other axes of oppression such as caste, class, and heteronormativity. In what follows, we trace some parts of this process, paying attention not just to the ways in which humanities scholarship has engaged with the women's movement(s), but also to how the meanings that have accrued to the categories that animate and describe this terrain have changed. Rather than recount a necessarily incomplete history of the feminist movement(s) in India, we organize our exploration around key feminist concepts that emerged during the last two decades. Though drawn from an engagement with activist endeavors, academic questions are more theoretical—for example, Who is the subject of feminist politics?—while activism engages more with "how" questions, such as, How can we address sexual harassment complaints within an institution? As various elements attach to it in different domains, feminism as a category changes, grows, fragments, and accumulates different shades and layers of meaning.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first section sketches a brief history of women's movement(s) in India and changes within academia in the corresponding period. The next three sections engage with particular strands of this history and are centered around key feminist categories: feminist engagement with sexual violence; challenges to Indian feminism that developed around the axes of caste, religion, and sexuality; and the concept of intersectionality.

A Brief History of the Women's Movement in India

Scholars have observed that the vocabularies that shaped notions of social reform and fueled the women's movement in India predate both the organization of the humanities and social sciences and the establishment of gender studies in the Indian academic context. It was under colonial rule that social reform movements began to crystallize around issues like child marriage, *sati* (widow immolation), and widow remarriage. As several scholars have shown, the manner in which

these issues were framed primarily served to legitimate colonialism and further its civilizing narrative, as well as to (re)produce these very issues across castes and regions by generalizing them. The "colonial episteme," as Mary E. John has argued, located Indian women in a tension between the "social" and the "political," terms that denoted distinct realms as differentiated under colonial systems of knowledge and governance.[3] The notion of social reform took shape within this tension, as women—associated with tradition and culture—began to be recognized as occupying the social and making tentative claims on the state towards improving their status.

A few decades after Independence, in the late 1960s and 1970s, newer forms of engagement with women's issues began to emerge. Urban unemployment, food shortages, droughts, and other markers of the shortcomings of the Nehruvian model of planned development led to protests that, in turn, created the space for what came to be known as the autonomous women's movement—autonomous in the sense that it was not affiliated with a particular political party—to emerge and to question the legitimacy of the new nation-state.[4] These were the conditions that made up what John calls the "national episteme," a critique of economic development and liberal equality as articulated within the parameters of the nation-state. This "democratic upsurge" created a "conscious collective basis" and was influenced by national and international policy initiatives in complex ways.[5]

In 1971 the Committee on the Status of Women in India was set up to review women's actual situation as compared to their constitutional rights. The committee's report represented India at the United Nations' gathering for the International Women's Year in 1975.[6] What it revealed was the abysmal condition of Indian women according to markers such as sex ratio (ratio of females to males), economic security, and electoral participation. Its findings came as a shock to the academics, social workers, policymakers, and others who had been

[3] Mary E. John, "Feminist Vocabularies in Time and Space: Perspectives from India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 31, 2014, 123–24; see also Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 88.

[4] Mary E. John, *Women's Studies in India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008), 2.

[5] John, "Feminist Vocabularies," 126; John, *Women's Studies*, 3. Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992), 19.

[6] *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (also known as Guha Committee Report on Women) (New Delhi: Department of Social Welfare, Government of India, 1974). https://indianculture.gov.in/towards-equality-report-committee-status-women-india.

the beneficiaries of national development. It prompted some members of the committee to reconsider their belief in the constitutional guarantees of equality and made them critically aware of their own privileged positions, especially within the sphere of higher education. Women's studies began in India in 1975 against this backdrop with funding from the state via the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research (ICSSR) and a base of supporters and contributors. It also began with challenges from those involved in various democratic movements challenging the state.

Indian womanhood was often strongly distinguished from Western womanhood in public discourse and in academia—and to widely differing effect. In public discourse this distinction was made, and continues to be made, in order to dismiss Indian feminism as a derivative of Western feminism (and, therefore, at odds with Indian culture), and Indian womanhood was lauded as superior to its Western counterpart. Academics of Indian origin engaged with this distinction between Indian and Western feminism, especially with respect to the political and epistemological underpinnings of the different reactions to their work and the differently grounded accusations of inauthenticity that their work sparked, both at home and in Western university settings.[7] Grouped together with other postcolonial and developing nations, "Third World" feminism, and other types of knowledge from the Global South, Indian feminists were forced to define themselves in stark contrast to Western feminism and knowledge systems.

The journey these categories have undergone is one of multiple challenges to feminism's egalitarian project, arising from both academia and activist practice, and of a fundamental grappling with the complexities of identity.

As women's studies slowly congealed from a bricolage of critical perspectives into a discipline in India, the autonomous women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s began to root itself in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), because of the easier access to funds and greater accountability that NGOs afforded as opposed to the more informally organized autonomous collectives.[8] This change is often criticized for having blunted the transformative edge of the movement in favor of agendas that were more attuned to global neoliberal developmental paradigms and administered according to the imperatives of funders, state

[7] Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception," *Feminist Review*, no. 35 (1990): 31.

[8] Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*, 36–38; Srila Roy, "Politics, Passion and Professionalization in Contemporary Indian Feminism," *Sociology* 45, no. 4 (2011): 589.

planning initiatives, and United Nations directives.[9] However, it also enabled feminists from less elite backgrounds to enter this perceived altruistic voluntary sphere, no longer having to choose "passion or profession." Critiques of NGO-ization and neoliberal developmental paradigms, thus, coexist uneasily with the counter-assertion that funding enables women from marginal locations to professionally engage in feminist activity.

Feminism and Its Engagement with Sexual Violence

Historians such as Tanika Sarkar and Lata Mani have explored the way violence against women emerged as a category of public discourse during the colonial period. While Sarkar's work charts the debates around child marriage and the age of consent in colonial Bengal, Mani examines the public debates surrounding the movement for the abolition of *sati*.[10] They show that, although these reformist debates were ostensibly about Indian women, women merely constituted the symbolic grounds on which men, colonizer and colonized, came to discuss India and its traditions within an episteme structured by colonial power relations.

Through the lens of categories like rape, sexual harassment, consent, and justice, in this section we recount the growth of humanities knowledge surrounding feminism in postindependence India. We refer to certain specific cases—those of Mathura, Rameeza Bee, Bhanwari Devi, and Nirbhaya—which are significant because of their long public afterlife and the impact they have had on the categories of feminist thought and engagement in India.

We will briefly recount these cases: In 1980 two policemen charged with raping Mathura, a teenage girl from an Indigenous tribe, were acquitted by the Supreme Court. The incident took place in March 1972, and in June 1974 a sessions court found the policemen not guilty on the basis of the argument that Mathura was habituated to sex. Later, the Bombay High Court found the two policemen guilty, stating that passive submission out of fear could not be construed as consent. However, the Supreme Court reversed this ruling, contending that her being used to sex was an indication that Mathura had actively lured the policemen. Mathura's case sparked widespread mobilization among women and the formation of women's groups, as we shall see. However, this support died away with time and after the Supreme Court verdict, Mathura faded away from the public eye and popular feminist imagination.

[9] Indu Agnihotri, "Re-Reading Histories," *Seminar*, no. 505 (September 2001): 10.

[10] Tanika Sarkar, "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 601–22; Mani, "Contentious Traditions."

In 1978 the case of Rameeza Bee shook the city of Hyderabad. Arrested and charged with prostitution when returning home with her husband after watching a movie, she was beaten and raped by four policemen, and her husband was beaten to death. Rameeza Bee's case was met with public outrage and protest, and appeals were made against the acquittal of the policemen at every level of the judicial system.[11]

In September 1992 Bhanwari Devi, an employee of the Women's Development Program, was raped in her village as "punishment" for carrying out state-mandated efforts to stop a child marriage. The Indian women's movement supported Bhanwari Devi's legal journey at every stage. The sessions court acquitted those accused, observing that, as per Indian culture, neither an uncle nor a nephew would jointly commit rape, nor would they violate caste norms by raping a lower-caste woman. The court also held that her husband, who had been forced to stand and watch, would not have done so. Bhanwari Devi's case prompted the creation of the Vishakha guidelines on how to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace.

The brutal gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, referred to as Nirbhaya (fearless), took place on December 16, 2012, in Delhi. A twenty-three-year-old physiotherapy intern, she was the first in her upwardly mobile middle-class family to access higher education. She and a male friend (initially reported as her boyfriend) were in a private bus returning from watching a movie. When the bus went off its regular route and her male friend tried to find out why, a scuffle ensued. While her friend was knocked unconscious, Jyoti Singh was brutally raped. Thrown out of the bus, Jyoti Singh and her friend were found injured on the side of the road and taken to emergency care. After multiple surgeries, Jyoti Singh died on December 29. Her six assailants were arrested and charged with rape and murder.

At the start of the 1980s, after the unfavorable Supreme Court judgment in the Mathura case and an open letter to the Chief Justice of India from four prominent law professors protesting the miscarriage of justice, several new women's groups around the country raised questions about a range of practices, including bride burning, dowry violence, female infanticide, and *sati*. This was in the early years of the autonomous women's movement, which subsequently moved away from the nationalist-developmental approach of its predecessors and tried to articulate and organize more strategically around women's issues. Many of the women in these autonomous women's groups were urban, educated, and middle class, and had previously worked with left-oriented peasant and

[11] Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*, 39.

worker movements that looked to the nation-state for the redress of grievances. Although these autonomous groups constituted only a small part of the women's movement of that time, their autonomy—from political parties and external donors—became almost normative to feminism in India due to their visibility and success in agitating for legal change.

In the 1980s these groups' campaigns focused almost entirely on custodial rape, as an aggravated form of rape. Fueled by the cases of Mathura and Rameeza Bee, rape began to be seen as a women's issue in the public imagination and not a civil rights issue. Feminist histories of that period recount a litany of such cases and their role in sparking public outrage. Rape, dowry murders, wife beating, and sexual harassment became legible to public discourse through consciousness-raising street plays, songs, and skits, in addition to campaigns for legal reform and academic engagement.[12] The "national episteme" had moved from having faith in the nation-state and in the idea of state-led nation building to critiquing that very state and its development initiatives, and as a result it faced a contradiction: appealing to the law against the state's own excesses of power while also trying to pressure the state to uphold its promise to protect people's welfare. This demand for protection from the state, coupled with a direct challenge to the excesses and brutality of the state, marked the slow end of the national episteme, and the birth of women's studies as a discipline in the 1970s contributed to this internal critique. Feminist analyses of legislative debates from the 1980s have shown how the distinctions between rape and sex, chaste and unchaste, power and powerlessness, and law and morality were written into the legal conception of rape in ways that made it difficult to recognize women's sexual agency and secure their legal protection.[13] Also, while rape and consent had entered the legal lexicon, the focus on custodial rape—in both activist and academic interventions—allowed for the elision of other forms of rape, like incest and marital rape, even as it coded the nation-state itself as patriarchal. When the uncomfortable question of rape and child abuse was brought up, legislators preferred to insist on better implementation of child marriage laws rather than consider the risk to children from within the natal family, and to limit the conception of rape to penile penetration thereby making other forms of child abuse all but invisible. Suggestions that marital rape be recognized in law were met with anxieties about the threat this would pose to the family and contested even by members of the women's movement on the grounds that women would be reluctant to accuse their husbands of rape.

[12] Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*, 36–67.

[13] Geetanjali Gangoli, "The Right to Protection from Sexual Assault: The Indian Anti-rape Campaign," *Development in Practice* 6, no. 4 (1996), 336.

Women were described in public discourse in terms that invoked honor and deification, and the violation of that honor called for stringent punishment. Although a raped woman was pitied for the stigma she bore and for her consequent inability to marry, legislators were "aware" that not all women were "virtuous" or conformed to "normal standards of womanhood."[14] Here, the idea of the "unchaste woman" was mapped on to women from the working classes and oppressed castes, who were seen as likely to lie and victimize "respectable" men. Public and legislative discourses were unable to factor in the existence of different modes of sexual conduct, and, as with the Mathura case, women's sexual agency and sexual history could be used to undermine their legal protections. Conversely, the legal system's inability to comprehend women's sexual agency also resulted in some women's testimony being more readily believed, with judges reasoning that no woman would risk the dishonor of alleging rape in order to make a false accusation. Thus, women's reliability as witnesses to their own violation is often tied to their conduct, chastity, and respectability.[15] Rape was thus effectively framed as a crime perpetrated by strangers, involving a loss of a woman's virginity or sexual chastity.

Apart from its engagement with the law, feminist scholarship also highlighted the intentional use of rape to reinscribe everyday social hierarchies, especially targeting women from vulnerable and marginalized groups. Some examples of this reinscription are as follows: In 2006, in the village of Khairlanji, Maharashtra, after a Dalit woman complained to the police about a land dispute, members of the locally dominant Kunbi caste stripped her naked and paraded her and her children in the village, repeatedly sexually assaulted them, and then hacked them to death. During the 2002 Godhra riots in Gujarat, Muslim women were raped in a particularly gruesome manner, with pregnant women being targeted and slogans inscribed on their private parts. Bilkis Bano, one of these women, was gang-raped by Hindu men from her locality, who also murdered her daughter and several members of her family before her eyes.

These punitive rapes, a response to some alleged "transgression" committed either by the woman herself or by other members of her family or caste group, rest heavily on a notion of honor. This notion of honor extends far beyond the individuals violated and serves as a symbolic means to dishonor/shame an entire

[14] Geetanjali Gangoli, "Controlling Women's Sexuality: Rape Law in India," in *International Approaches to Rape*, ed. Nicole Westmarland and Geetanjali Gangoli (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2011), 109–10.

[15] Srimati Basu, "Sexual Property: Rape and Marriage Conjoined," in *The Trouble with Marriage: Feminists Confront Law and Violence in India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 150–75.

community. One of the biggest endeavors of the anti-rape campaign in India (and the feminist movement across the world) has been the recognition of rape as a form of violence instead of being seen as a violation of honor.

With respect to incidents of mass violence and the use of rape against particular groups, Veena Das observes how "in the face of the disorder of collective violence, the state appears to absent itself."[16] While some scholarship engages with the silences of law in the context of sexual violence and the many meanings and implications of this silence or absence, other work explores the discursive and juridical context in which the concept of rape is defined.[17] Das argues that attention to the "dense discursivity" of the rape trial, as it separates the "normal" from the "pathological," reveals the "production of bodies (male and female) that normalizes sexual violence at least for the purpose of the law."[18] Thus, sex and rape are not always distinguishable in legal and public discourses. Moreover, seeing rape as a product of male lust, rather than a form of violence, encodes rape as biological.[19] The concerns of a normative patriarchal and caste-based morality, underwritten by a scientistic and medico-legal ethnographic discourse, inflect concepts such as rape and consent. The objective of rape law, then, is not to deter rape against all women but to control normal levels of violence against some women and increase disciplinary power over all women.[20]

Other studies link rape to the idea of women as property exchanged by men within kinship networks.[21] They show that rape diminishes a woman's value to the kinship network, which allows marriage to the rapist to be an acceptable form of reparation. At the other end of this spectrum, consensual sex on the promise of marriage is also coded as rape within the law. At this protectionist pole, the denial of sexual agency to women is seen as means of safeguarding their honor, and relationships are seen as consensual only once rendered legitimate by marriage. Although women have often used this feature of the law to secure some degree of commitment from men who refuse to take responsibility, scholars argue that to see it as rape is to participate in a discourse that not only sets up sex as legitimate only within marriage, but also makes rape a matter of

[16] Veena Das, "Sexual Violence, Discursive Formations and the State," *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 1996, 2411.

[17] Pratiksha Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Pratiksha Baxi, "Sexual Violence and Its Discontents," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 139–54.

[18] Das, "Sexual Violence," 2411.

[19] Abhishek Bhalla, "The Rapes Will Go On," *Tehelka*, April 14, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20210918011526/http://old.tehelka.com/the-rapes-will-go-on/.

[20] Pratiksha Baxi, "Rape, Retribution, State: On Whose Bodies?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 1–7, 2000, 1196.

[21] Basu, "Sexual Property."

fraud rather than violence.[22]

This mirroring of marriage and rape marks out a rather narrow space for feminist interventions to function and to demand state action. What these analyses reveal, moreover, are the linkages between marriage and violence and the limits of law, and the need therefore to go beyond it. Similarly, scholarship on the complexities of domestic violence, on the empiricist-legal discourse that casts women as victims, and on the need to understand the complex engagement of women surviving domestic violence with the law points to the limits of law.[23]

Sexual harassment emerged as a category in connection with the Bhanwari Devi case and the Vishakha guidelines that emerged through the process of seeking justice in its aftermath. More significantly, sexual harassment replaced "eve teasing" as a category and became available as a concept that enabled women to narrate their experiences and name the harm that had been done to them and around which women's groups could mobilize, thus marking a discursive break with the past.

The Nirbhaya incident, too, elicited spontaneous and widespread public outrage, allowing a more nuanced discourse to emerge as questions that hitherto had been largely academic were now being raised in public. Questions concerning the caste and class dynamics of public sympathy, the construction of rape as "stranger rape," and the markers of the perfect victim came out of the safety of university spaces and into the cacophony of public discourse.[24] The story of Nirbhaya was powerfully contrasted with that of Suzette Jordan, to highlight the hypocrisy of public discourse, its glorification of a perfect victim and martyr, and the lack of popular support for more complex agential female figures fighting for justice.[25] Feminists and activists did their best to raise uncomfortable questions and push public discourse and legal reform further.

[22] Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics beyond the Law* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 120–26.

[23] A. Suneetha and Vasudha Nagaraj, "A Difficult Match: Women's Actions and Legal Institutions in the Face of Domestic Violence," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14–20, 2006, 4355–62.

[24] Anand Teltumbde, "Delhi Gang Rape Case: Some Uncomfortable Questions," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 9, 2013, 10–11.

[25] Suzette Jordan, a women's rights activist and a mother of two, was raped on February 5, 2012, on her way home from a pub in Park Street, Kolkata. In a powerful move, Suzette Jordan chose to publicly reveal her name, as she felt she did not need to feel ashamed. She fought her case until she died of an unrelated medical condition. Her assailants were convicted after her death. Suzette Jordan's story met with a mixed public reaction. Her presence at a pub late at night, being a pub-going mother, and her willingness to be in the public eye, all of these did not fit the public's notion of a rape victim. See Flavia Agnes, "Why India Loves Nirbhaya, Hates Suzette," *Asian Age*, March 19, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20150322131906/https://www.asianage.com/columnists/why-india-loves-nirbhaya-hates-suzette-723.

A range of other incidents prodded the women's movement and academic feminism to engage with issues surrounding the use of sexual violence as a tool of the state, the discursive construction of rape, and the inscription of sexual difference and inequalities of power onto women's bodies. Custodial rape and sexual violence by the armed forces and police have a long history, especially in areas where the armed forces enjoy impunity such as Kashmir and the North-east of India. The nationalist discourse surrounding the armed forces and the police as those who safeguard our borders and maintain law and order enables the impunity with which these acts of violence are carried out. Incidents like the Manipuri mothers' protest against the rape of Thangjam Manorama Devi and the murder of Akku Yadav dramatically transformed the "signifiers of victimhood, class and legal protection," while also recalling troubling traditional notions of a vengeful woman/deity taking back her honor.[26] Moments of resistance such as these deliver a sharp rebuke to the law and its inability to deliver justice even if they are also embedded in the very semantic systems that they seek to challenge.

Widening the Base: Feminism and the Subject of Feminist Politics

We have been exploring feminist thought around issues of violence that are particular to women. The 1990s, however, marked a break with the notion that "women" constituted a homogeneous category. Fractures sprung up as a fertile and effervescent critique demanded recognition of the ways in which

[26] Basu, "Sexual Property," 162.

Thangjam Manorama Devi was arrested in her home in Manipur, a state in the Northeast of India, in July 2004. Her body was found the next day, riddled with bullets and mutilated. It emerged that she had been raped and tortured before being killed. The Assam Rifles, who are part of the civil police, claimed she had been killed while trying to escape; however, evidence suggested otherwise. The Gauhati High Court ruled that as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was in force, the Assam Rifles had to be dealt with by the central government and the state government had no jurisdiction over them.

The failure to hold those responsible for her brutal rape and murder accountable sparked a historic protest. A number of Manipuri women walked naked through the state capital of Imphal to the Assam Rifles headquarters, shouting for the Indian Army to rape them too as they were all Manorama's mothers. This protest came to be known as the Manipuri Mothers' protest and recognized for the use of the protestors' identity as mothers and of their nudity to challenge the impunity of the Indian state. For more see Kalpana Kannabiran and Ritu Menon, *From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence against Women in India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007).

In 2004 the women of Kasturba Nagar, Nagpur, lynched Akku Yadav, an upper-caste man who had raped several girls and women from the neighborhood with impunity. Terming their act "social justice" rather than murder, roughly 200 women collectively claimed responsibility for his violent end. Raekha Prasad, "'Arrest Us All': The 200 Women Who Killed a Rapist," *Guardian*, September 16, 2005.

other identities, such as caste, religion, race, disability, sexuality, and gender identity, were also formative in crucial ways, of women's subjectivities. The women's movement also entered what some have referred to as a new episteme of the "post-national," marked by the realization that the nation-state was no longer the sole "horizon or frame of reference for our questions and critiques."[27]

Emergent understandings of caste, religion, and queer politics reshaped both the central concept of feminism(s) and associated concepts such as women, gender, and patriarchy. Although other categories, such as class, race, and disability, are significant, here we engage with the challenges that have been most documented in order to reflect on the current situation. The journey these categories have undergone is one of multiple (curated) challenges to feminism's egalitarian project, arising from both academia and activist practice, and of a fundamental grappling with the complexities of identity.

Caste

"I have been associated with the Indian feminist movement since the 1970s. Let me tell you something: women in the women's movement lack a good understanding of feminism," declared Ruth Manorama in a 2007 interview with Meena Kandaswamy.[28] Dalit feminists like Ruth Manorama fault the mainstream feminist movement for failing to recognize caste as a structure of inequality and for not involving Dalit, Bahujan (people belonging to Scheduled Castes—formerly called "untouchables"—Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes), Adivasi (Indigenous populations), and laboring women in positions of leadership despite their considerable presence in the movement. Dalit-Bahujan women's assertions against Dalit men in the anticaste movement and against Savarna women in feminist movements highlight the lack of opportunities for their voices to be presented and heard. For our purposes here we will be engaging largely with the challenges they have presented to the feminist movement.

Existing understandings of the category "woman" and the concept of feminism had not been able to accommodate the contradictions posed by women from different caste locations, making visible subtle forms of caste discrimination, including tokenism. Although the feminism of the time foregrounded experience, it refused to acknowledge the salience of caste-based inequality and instead presumed the experience of privileged women was universally appli-

[27] John, "Feminist Vocabularies," 127.

[28] Ruth Manorama, "On Caste and Patriarchy: An Interview with Ruth Manorama," interview by Meena Kandasamy, *Ultra Violet* (blog), December 27, 2007, https://youngfeminists.wordpress.com/2007/12/27/on-caste-and-patriarchy-an-interview-with-ruth-manorama/.

cable.[29] Speaking of the anti-Mandal agitation in the 1990s, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana note how women who participated in these protests were cast as assertive, idealistic, insubmissive feminist subjects, demanding their rights as citizens.[30] Transcending caste, community, and gender in the interest of the nation and democracy, Savarna women were seen as the "authentic bearers of secularism and egalitarianism," standing up against concessions and denuding the hallowed concept of "merit."[31] They protested against reservation, sometimes holding placards demanding employed husbands, revealing the intertwining of caste and patriarchy in their assumption that such employed husbands could not be from the backward castes and that women were dependent on their husbands.

Scholars continue to explore the gendered work of Savarna women in perpetuating caste even as they negotiate greater autonomy. "The whole issue of sexuality is basically rooted in caste. They control women because only that can ensure pure blood in the lineage," remarks Ruth Manorama.[32] Scholars have noted the particular violence of the caste system in maintaining the "purity" of Savarna women by ensuring that men of lower castes have no access to them. Honor killings, which usually involve the brutal killing of a Dalit man and violence to the upper-caste woman who dared to go against familial norms, are an example of this.[33] Similarly, while accusations of harassment made by upper-caste women against lower-caste men need not necessarily be disbelieved, the sequence of events in the case of caste-based atrocities suggests that these claims have often been voiced in order to justify the murders of the Dalit men. For example, the murder of thirteen Dalits by Reddys in Chunduru on August 6, 1991, appears to have been sparked by the entry of a young, educated Dalit man into a movie theater traditionally reserved for upper castes. Later, upper-caste women complained of harassment by the Dalits, implying a long history of

[29] See T. Sowjanya, "Understanding Dalit Feminism," *The Philosopher: A Research Journal* 2, no. 2 (2014): 146; Sharmila Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," *Seminar*, no. 710 (2018): 1.

[30] In 1979 the Indian government set up a commission to identify beneficiaries of India's reservation policy. It was headed by B. P. Mandal and became known as the Mandal Commission. On August 7, 1990, Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced that the recommendations of the Mandal Commission with regard to reservation—a form of affirmative action that involves "reserving" a percentage of positions for applicants from disadvantaged groups—for backward castes would be implemented. Several student protests against reservation erupted across North India and in Hyderabad.

[31] Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," *Social Scientist* 22, no. 3–4 (1994): 97.

[32] Manorama, "On Caste and Patriarchy." See also Shraddha Chickerur, "Brahman Women as Cultured Homemakers—Unpacking Caste, Gender Roles and Cultural Capital Across Three Generations," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 4 (2021): 417–28.

[33] Kiruba Munusamy, "Dalit Masculinity," paper presented at the Centre for Health Law, Ethics and Technology, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India, May 12, 2020.

such grievances against these men, eventually sparking further violence against Dalit men. The original incident of the Dalit man was subsequently reported to describe him putting his feet up on a seat occupied by a "caste-Hindu" girl.

While accusations by upper-caste women could spark and justify brutal violence against Dalits (where women, at times, were participants), years of abuse suffered by Dalit women at the hands of upper-caste men is simply coded as "tradition." Dalit-Bahujan women seeking to have their voices heard have had a complicated relationship with speaking up about the patriarchy they encounter. Although they face a far greater degree of caste-based sexual violence, Dalit women voicing accusations against upper-caste men often results in doubt being cast on their own chastity and truthfulness. Traditionally seen as available for exploitation by upper-caste men,[34] Dalit women who resist or transgress caste norms are subjected to retaliatory violence. Powerless to intervene in such situations, Dalit men, too, are thus emasculated and humiliated.[35]

The concepts of Dalit masculinity and Dalit patriarchy were theorized in this milieu. Dalit writers such as Kancha Ilaiah have described Dalit patriarchy as being more democratic, given the lack of *sati*, child-marriage, permanent widowhood, and certain humiliating rituals among Dalit families.[36] Gabrielle Dietrich has made similar claims regarding the low socioeconomic status of Dalit families, which make dowry itself rare, dowry deaths even rarer, and divorce easier, given the lack of property.[37] Ilaiah and Dietrich claim that when violence does occur in Dalit families, women do not face the same pressures as upper-caste women do to keep it private and can challenge such violence loudly and publicly. Other scholars note that Dalit women often have little difficulty confronting their fathers within their households, unlike Savarna women.[38] They thus regard patriarchy in Dalit households as an effect of the accumulation of wealth and the imitation of upper-caste practices.

Others argue that though patriarchy may take on a different form in Dalit households, it cannot be called "democratic." The assertion that Dalits respect

[34] Aloysius Irudayam S. J., Jayshree P. Mangubhai, and Joel G. Lee, *Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India. Overview Report of Study in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu/Pondicherry and Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2006), 7–8.

[35] V. Geetha, "The Violence of Caste and the Violence in Homes," *Agenda*, no. 25 (2012): 44.

[36] Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996), 34.

[37] Dietrich, cited in T. Sowjanya, "Understanding Dalit Feminism," 149.

[38] "Whose Personal Is Political Enough? Radhika Ganesh in Conversation with Semmalar, Dalit Feminist and Scholar," Ek Potlee Ret Ki, July 6, 2020, video, 1:36:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrV_pN59ZdE.

divorce and second marriage has been questioned, just as it has been pointed out that the lack of compulsion surrounding the removal of jewelry and the observance of elaborate mourning rituals stems more from the lack of jewelry and time among Dalit widows and the need to labor daily for the sake of their survival, rather than any "progressive" absence of such demeaning rituals.[39] Also, while the absence of degrading rituals is significant, this does not lessen the frequency of wife beating or male control over the woman's earnings within the family.[40] Though Dalit men are rendered powerless in the face of the caste structure, they do exercise control over Dalit women, in terms of both their sexuality and labor. Thus, Dalit women face violence both through the public patriarchy of the caste order and through familial patriarchy; some scholars refer to this as an "ontology of violence."[41] Thus, Dalit culture and its patriarchy are not an alternative to upper-caste culture but part of that same system.

V. Geetha posits that high rates of domestic violence among Dalit men are a product of their emasculation by the upper castes and that they in turn assert their dominance over Dalit women. Even as they recognize the system that engenders it, scholars have called for Dalit men to complement the efforts of Dalit women in challenging the interlinked systems of caste and patriarchy and to "address the violence that is constitutive of their existence as an important political issue and examine its implications for their own familial and kin roles."[42] However, Savarna women have been critiqued for calling for such introspection: in classifying domestic violence as a problem specific to Dalits, they delimit an "observational zone that has been marked off from the rest of the humans."[43]

Several Dalit feminists see concepts such as Dalit masculinity as fixing the blame for domestic abuse on individual men rather than on the system of caste that produces it. Some see the concept as an imposition by anti-Dalit scholars, analogous to the idea of Black masculinity in the United States.[44] Since caste regularly overrides other identities, the idea of a hegemonic masculinity does not make sense in the Indian context where Savarna women are regularly

[39] T. Sowjanya, "Understanding Dalit Feminism," 150.

[40] M. Swathy Margaret, "Dalit Feminism," Round Table India, October 3, 2010, https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2623:dalit-feminism-23642&catid=120&Itemid=133.

[41] V. Geetha, "The Violence of Caste," 43.

[42] V. Geetha, "The Violence of Caste," 44; V. Geetha, *Patriarchy* (Kolkata: Stree, 2007).

[43] Anu Ramdas, "My Man," Round Table India, July 4, 2012, https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5364:my-man&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132.

[44] Kiruba Munusamy, "Dalit Masculinity—The Many Frames," paper presented at the University of Hyderabad, January 27, 2020.

complicit, if not active, in the humiliation of Dalit men. Dalit masculinity is, thus, a contentious category.

Dalit experience also affects the forms of knowledge production. A rich body of literature has emerged in which Dalit women refuse structures of academic thought and express themselves in a more fluid idiom, including Bama's 1992 autobiography, *Karukku*, and her works of fiction; Meena Kandasamy's evocative poetry, fiery speeches, and her novel *Gypsy Goddess* (based on the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968), and Gogu Shyamala's delightfully experiential short stories. These works imagine a realm beyond and outside narratives of heroism and victimhood. Likewise, the works of Kumud Pawde, P. Sivakami, Joopaka Subhadra, Sujatha Gidla, and Urmila Pawar reveal the complexity of their lived experiences. These works highlight the need for alternative avenues of Dalit feminist expression.

We have already touched upon the concept of merit and how it makes structures of caste invisible. Within the Indian academy, merit performs a gatekeeping function, defined by English language proficiency and familiarity with certain upper-caste codes of behavior and ways of structuring and presenting knowledge.[45] Dalit women have been systematically denied access to academic resources and, thus, a voice in academia. Even when they do manage to enter its hallowed portals, the subtle discrimination, humiliation, and outright exploitation they continue to encounter act as obstacles to full belonging in that space.

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The emancipatory potential of "knowledge from the margins" is grounded in the identity of those articulating it; their disadvantaged position grants them epistemic privilege. However, Dalit women's claim to "talk differently" assumes

[45] Bittu Karthik Kondaiah, Shalini Mahadev, and Maranatha Grace T. Wahlang, "The Production of Science Bearing Gender, Caste and More," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, April 29, 2017, 77–79.

that their social location will remain more or less stable and that what they say will foreground the speaker's identity as a Dalit woman.[46] Scholars thus advocate adopting a Dalit feminist "standpoint," in order to avoid the danger of furthering narrow identity politics, which would limit the emancipatory potential of this discourse.[47] Some theorists attempt to adopt an Ambedkarite[48] or Dalit feminist standpoint despite not being Dalit women. This fraught position has been criticized for being part of a structure of knowledge production that results in the Savarnas dominating even Dalit feminist theory.

Religion

Religion in India has been an axis of difference always intertwined with gender. In this section, we survey the main threads of academic engagement with religion and gender through a focus on Muslim women and personal law. Such a focus allows us to show the significance of Islam as "the other" to Hinduism in both public discourse and academic engagement.

Historians have documented the ways in which colonial era discourses shaped Muslim identity in India. A number of novels from the early 1920s celebrate romance between Hindu men and Muslim women that "recovered" Muslim women from Islam, while painting Muslim men as uncontrollable and lecherous rapists and abductors, from whom Hindu women needed to be saved.[49] Such ideas fueled the increased control of Hindu women's sexuality during the colonial and early postcolonial periods, as well as the othering of Muslims (and, to a lesser extent, Christians). Hindu masculinity, meanwhile, became centered on protecting Hindu women's chastity and purity, and the narrative of abduction allowed the blurring of caste-based differences among Hindu men, uniting them against Muslims.

The mass violence and displacement surrounding the 1947 Partition was also framed in similar ways. Veena Das unravels the way discourses of kinship and politics intersected on the question of "abducted women," premised on the notion

[46] Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14–21, 1995, 2549.

[47] Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," 8.

[48] Followers of the teachings of B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's constitution, which was informed by his staunchly anticaste philosophy and pro-democratic and socialist worldview.

[49] See Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 222–67.

of national honor.[50] She also looks at the subsequent return of these abducted women, their "exchange" between the governments of India and Pakistan, and the "veils of silence" that surrounded them—hiding breaches in norms of purity in order to absorb the women into normal structures of family and marriage. Other works capture the voices of women survivors of communal violence as they go about their lives beyond this framing of abduction and victimhood.[51]

The contentious process of the codification of Hindu law in the 1950s and the granting of divorce rights to Hindu women took place amid highly charged public debate.[52] Scholars have noted a shift in the rhetoric surrounding these enactments. Whereas previously Muslim women's access to divorce and property rights had meant a positive characterization of their rights in comparison with Hindu women, during the first postindependence decades the focus was instead on the issue of polygamy, which rendered Muslim women the unfortunate victims of patriarchy and Hindu communities as disciplined modern subjects of the new nation-state.[53] In the discourses surrounding the new nation, to the extent that Muslims were seen as the other, Muslim women came to occupy a space analogous to Hindu women under colonialism, assuming the role as symbolic representatives of the community.[54] Muslim women were seen as in need of modernization, a framing that global discourses on women and Islam aided.

[50] Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 56–70.

[51] K. Lalita and Deepa Dhanraj, *Rupture, Loss and Living: Minority Women Speak about Post-Conflict Life* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016).

[52] This inclusion of divorce rights for Hindu women is described as "part of a modestly modernist strategy of making nation and family" (which notably did not involve the reform of minority family laws). See Narendra Subramanian, "Making Family and Nation: Hindu Marriage in Early Post-Colonial India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 3 (2010): 4. See also Madhu Kishwar, "Codified Hindu Law-Myth and Reality," *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 13, 1994, 2145–61; Archana Parashar, *Women and Family Law Reform in India: Uniform Civil Code and Gender Equality* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1992); Kumkum Sangari, *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narrative, Colonial English* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999).

[53] Kumkum Sangari, "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies (Part 2)," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 30, 1995, 3384.

[54] Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism and the Colonized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 632; Sylvia Vatuk, "Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim Women Activists and the Reform of Muslim Personal Law," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2–3 (2008): 516.

The rhetoric surrounding the 1985 Shah Bano case[55] and the 2017 Shayara Bano case,[56] and the legislation that followed both,[57] emphasized the victimhood of Muslim women and the existence of Muslim patriarchy. Humanities scholarship has noted the ways in which this trope recurs and how it fails to recognize the multiple structures that keep the majority of the Muslim population in India in conditions of poverty and subordination. It frames Islam as the oppressor—monolithic, premodern, and patriarchal—ignoring the heterogeneity within Muslim communities and theology. It also forecloses the possibility of seeking reform from within, in line with modern conceptions of gender justice, by pushing Muslims to adopt a defensive stance with regard to their identity.[58] Scholars studying attempts at "reform from within" note that the idea presupposes that the problems of women stem from the religions they belong to, thus conflating religion and personal law and ignoring the possibility that religious

[55] The Shah Bano case was a landmark moment for the recognition of religion within the women's movement. Shah Bano was a Muslim woman who claimed maintenance from her ex-husband under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC). Her husband, supported by the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, claimed that, as he had paid Shah Bano the maintenance due to her under Islamic law, he had discharged his duties toward her and could not be held liable. The Supreme Court ruled that the CrPC applies to all Indians irrespective of religion and awarded Shah Bano maintenance. Against the backdrop of communal tensions, there were widespread protests by Muslims against what they saw as an attack on their personal law. In 1986 the Rajiv Gandhi government passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, exempting Muslim men from the CrPC if they had discharged their maintenance obligations under Muslim Personal Law.

[56] In 2015 Shayara Bano's husband sent her a *talaqnama*, or an intimation of divorce, and, in an attempt to avoid maintenance payments, he also sent the *mehr* sum agreed upon at the time of marriage. Her two children were taken away from her. In 2016 Shayara Bano challenged the validity of the practice of *talaq-i-bidat*, or the instantaneous form of divorce effected by pronouncing *talaq* thrice, hence "triple talaq" in court. Five other women joined her petition, and her case was supported by several women's rights organizations. In August 2017 a five-member bench of the Supreme Court in a three-to-two majority declared triple talaq illegal and having no basis in the Sharia.

[57] The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act of 2019 made triple talaq a non-bailable criminal offence. It thus incarcerated the husband while leaving the marriage intact, exposing the woman to blame and violence in the matrimonial home. Muslim women's organizations, such as the Bebaak Collective, issued a statement criticizing the legislation and pointing out its flaws. While the Act criminalizes desertion by Muslim husbands, desertion by husbands from other religions is only considered a marital fault, and its punitive mode was more likely to deter women from complaining.

[58] Zoya Hasan, "Minority Identity, Muslim Women Bill Campaign and the Political Process," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 7, 1989, 44–45.

patriarchies are constituted of much more than personal laws.[59] The discourse also allows the erasure of the particularity and heterogeneity of Hindu identity, law, and patriarchy, casting it as universal, secular, and modern, in a manner analogous to the dynamics of caste described above.

Major judicial challenges to Christian personal law in the same time period received far less attention. As with the 1955 codification of Hindu law, the debate surrounding Christian personal law is also staged around the legislature rather than the judiciary. It has been noted that though Christian law had little to no backing in Christian scripture or religious tradition, drawing instead from British laws current during the colonial period, they had come to be strongly associated with Christian identity.[60] Amendments to Christian personal laws in 2001 passed with minimal debate, however, because a wide coalition of church authorities and women's rights groups had worked for over a decade to draft the new bill.[61]

The discourse surrounding religion and gender in India appears to be most concerned with demarcating and maintaining boundaries between religions. Scholars note that parental deployment of state resources to curb young women's sexual and marital movement across religious lines has a long history. Parents and guardians regularly file habeas corpus petitions and cases of statutory rape and abduction when they deem their daughters' relationships inappropriate.[62] The idea of "love jihad," with its framing of women as passive carriers of community honor in need of constant protection, strengthens familial controls and denies women individuality and agency, while "honor killings" form a related set of

[59] See A. Suneetha, "Muslim Women and Marriage Laws: Debating the Model *Nikahnama*," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 27, 2012, 40–48; Suneetha, "Between *Haquq* and *Taaleem*: Muslim Women's Activism in Contemporary Hyderabad," *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 5, 2015, 7–8; Vatuk, "Islamic Feminism in India"; Kumkum Sangari, "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies (Part 1)," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December, 23, 1995, 3289.

[60] Flavia Agnes, "Church, State and Secular Spaces," *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 12, 2000, 2902; Nandini Chatterjee, "Religious Change, Social Conflict and Legal Competition: The Emergence of Christian Personal Law in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 6 (2010): 1184.

[61] Flavia Agnes, "Minority Identity and Gender Concerns," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 20, 2001, 3976.

[62] Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law*, 230.

practices fed by this discourse.[63]

In striking contrast, women who joined the Rashtrasevika Samiti and other right-wing groups appear agential and occupy mainstream conceptions of feminism, as demonstrated in the popular 2012 documentary *The World before Her* (dir. Nisha Pahuja). Their agency and independence in asserting themselves is fueled by the confidence of being "neutral."[64] Similarly, large numbers of Hindu women devotees were actively involved in protesting the 2018 Sabarimala verdict. This Supreme Court verdict was delivered by a five-member bench on September 28, 2018. It held that the Sabarimala temple's custom of prohibiting women from entering during their menstruating years was unconstitutional. One of the five judges dissented on the basis that in a democratic polity it was not up to the courts to interfere in matters of religion. More than fifty review petitions have been filed challenging the verdict. The court is currently framing questions and considering overarching constitutional issues related to the fundamental rights to equality and freedom of religion.

Such events disrupt our understanding of gender and religion and gesture toward the complexities their intersection creates. Feminism is easily co-opted by the Hindu right, as it mimics liberal and feminist arguments of gender equality and justice. Hindutva[65] purports to occupy a neutral ground, positioning itself as "a principled modernist critic" of minority fundamentalism and casts the liberal as a pseudo-secular apologist and propagator of bigotry.[66] In this framing, womanhood becomes marked as Hindu, and Muslim women are seen neither as truly Indian nor as truly Muslim. One way to see this is to accept the idea of religion as a space that is constitutive of and that perpetuates gendered

[63] Charu Gupta, "Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 19, 2009, 15; Jyoti Punwani, "Myths and Prejudices about 'Love Jihad,'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 18, 2014, 12–15; Pratiksha Baxi, Shirin M. Rai, and Shaheen Sardar Ali, "Legacies of Common Law: 'Crimes of Honour' in India and Pakistan," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 7 (2006); Sneha Annavarapu, "Human Rights, Honour Killings and the Indian Law: Scope for a 'Right to Have Rights,'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 14, 2013, 129–32.

[64] Tharu and Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," 107; Tanika Sarkar, "The Women of the Hindutva Brigade," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 25, no. 4 (1993): 19.

[65] Hindutva is a right-wing ideology espousing Hindu nationalism. It was propounded as a political ideology by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s. It seeks to secure India for Hindus and to synthesize the diverse and unique beliefs and practices that come under Hinduism into one monolithic and hegemonic belief system and bring in the corresponding social order.

[66] Partha Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 347.

inequalities.[67] However, this framing runs the risk of dismissing the complex and layered assertions of women of faith. Analysis of the discourse surrounding personal law, the women's movement, and developments in global discourses on feminism have pushed scholars to acknowledge that women do not exist as distinct from their religious communities and that their imagined solidarity, as *women*, would require an engagement with multiple, overlapping patriarchies.[68]

Scholars have also read assertions of women like Shayara Bano, Shah Bano, and the unnamed women who risked their lives to enter Sabarimala as speaking through their cases from within their religious communities, in order to claim religious identity, community membership, citizenship, and the rights due to them as women adherents of these religions.[69] Similarly, anthropologists have noted the ways Islamic feminists challenge the presumed right of established community authorities to dictate the terms of their religious identity and to regulate community membership.[70]

LGBTQIA*

The story of queerness in India is complex and many-layered. At one level, it is the story of loving, living, and often dying, in a realm beyond language. At another level it is a story older than India as a nation, threading through the stories and mythologies of various communities that have occupied this subcontinent. At this level, it is "a history of impurity" and a "lived relation to desire" not coded as queer or deviant, or indeed as anything in particular, that enables us to speak of the messiness of desire to a wide audience.[71] Hindi films from the 1970s and 1980s celebrated relationships that would today be termed queer; Hindu mythology is rife with tales of gods who change gender; Sufi poetry celebrates intimate closeness between a *pir* and a *murid* (master and disciple, respectively); and, culturally, same-sex physical (if not sexual) intimacy and cohabitation is seen as completely ordinary.[72]

Despite this complex history, it took several years for the women's move-

[67] Vineeta Sharma, "How Can Feminist Theology Reduce Gender Inequality in Religion?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 12, 2018, 7–8.

[68] Sangari, "Politics of Diversity (Part 1)," 3294; Sangari, "Politics of Diversity (Part 2)," 3381–88.

[69] Rohit De, "Personal Laws: A Reality Check," *Frontline*, September 6, 2013.

[70] Though the category "feminist" sits uneasily with those described. Vatuk, "Islamic Feminism in India," 515–17; De, "Personal Laws: A Reality Check."

[71] Madhavi Menon, *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2018), 11.

[72] Menon, *Infinite Variety*, 9–20.

ment and academic scholarship to acknowledge sexuality as anything beyond a fringe issue. It was not until the release of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996) that the category "lesbian" entered the lexicon of modern India. In fact, some of the earliest engagements with queerness in the humanities in India occurred amid protests and attacks on movie theaters. Scholars read this reaction as proof that Hindutva understood Indian culture essentially in terms of male control over female sexuality and that the rejection of patriarchy and the assertion that male bodies need not be the only subject of female desire threatened it. Thus, Indian culture and all its postcolonial contradictions became the terrain on which queerness had to be established or contested.[73] For instance, one scholar expresses discomfort with "flaunting" a sexual relationship in ways that could result in viewing culturally acceptable physical intimacy between women through the "prism of homosexuality," making explicit a tolerance to homosociality so long as it remains hidden and unacknowledged.[74]

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Press coverage of the controversy evoked a paralyzing fear at seeing the word "lesbian" in print—"a whisper that spoke of an identity that should be hidden from others"—and of having one's existence cause public uproar. It had ruptured the social pact of silence. Analysts debated the Western origins of lesbian identity and individuals negotiated internal conflicts regarding the use of the words "lesbian" and "sexuality," as the controversy sparked hope in finding allies interested in articulating these very categories; meanwhile Deepa Mehta herself insisted on distancing herself and her film from lesbianism in India even as the film was marketed through gay and lesbian channels in the West. Her "commitment to inauthenticity" was seen as the "commodification and exploitation" of lesbians as subject matter.[75] The film was also said to lack convincing characters, being more invested in critiquing heteropatriarchy. The controversy around *Fire* marks the public emergence of the hitherto secret category of lesbianism

[73] Tejaswini Niranjana and Mary E. John, "The Controversy over '*Fire*': A Select Dossier (Part I)," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2000): 372–74.

[74] Madhu Kishwar as cited in Niranjana and John, "The Controversy over '*Fire*': A Select Dossier (Part II)," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 3 (2000): 522–23.

[75] Niranjana and John, "The Controversy over '*Fire*'… (Part II)," 525; 519–20.

(despite it being the only film addressing this topic at the time) and illustrates how people engaged with the questions around representation that the film and the responses to it provoked.

Although several members of the women's movement have been various shades of queer, Chayanika Shah recounts how their acceptance within the women's movement did not result in a foregrounding of queer issues. The category "transgender," or "trans," took still longer to enter the existing feminist vocabulary, even among queer groups. "While we have people amongst us who do not feel like women, we didn't have the language of how to articulate it. I think in some way our feminism also restricted us. I mean, feminism allows us to be any kind of women, right? So then if somebody is not fitting in, the older feminism taught me to say that I'm a different kind of woman."[76] A slow recognition of the existence of trans people occurred alongside 1990s programs related to AIDS/HIV awareness. Public discourse conflated this "trans" identity with existing local identities, such as *hijras*, *kothis*, or *aravanis*,[77] bringing with it the sliver of acceptance that the caste order accords these identities but at the same time making invisible the vastly different experiences of non-*hijra* trans people. The 2014 judgment in the National Legal Services Authority court case declared trans people to be a third gender, with fundamental rights applying equally to them.[78] This opened up a space to conceive of gender and sex beyond the binaries of male and female, societal and biological, and thus to reconceptualize gender itself beyond the hegemonic understanding of naturalness that attaches to cisgender heterosexuality.[79]

Trans people's narratives also entered Indian literature in the early 2000s, with autobiographies such as *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth*

[76] Chayanika Shah, "Understanding Trans & Queer Issues in Women's Movements—An Interview with Chayanika Shah," The YP Foundation, April 4, 2017, https://medium.com/@theypfoundation/understanding-trans-queer-issues-in-womens-movements-an-interview-with-chayanika-shah-1b241b28a975.

[77] The term *hijra* refers to a community of people, "biologically male," who identify either as women or as "not-men." They live in separate communities, with their own initiation rituals, hierarchies, and professions, which include ritual functions within Hinduism. The term for an analogous community in Tamil Nadu is *aravani*. The term *kothis* also refers to "biologically male" individuals, who unlike *hijras* do not live in a separate community; they prefer to take the effeminate role in same-sex relationships. Several other local terms exist within the subcontinent to describe a variety of identities that can be included under the trans umbrella.

[78] *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* was a case filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), Poojya Mata Nasib Kaur Ji Women Welfare Society, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi.

[79] Chayanika Shah, Raj Merchant, Shals Mahajan, and Smriti Nevatia, *No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015).

about Me by A. Revathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, and *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manobi Bandopadhyay. Soon after came academic works such as *With Respect to Sex* by Gayatri Reddy, celebrated for her detailed ethnography and sensitivity to the dynamics of representing lives so different from her own, and *Queer Activism in India* by Naisargi N. Dave, which explored the complex relationship between the ethics of activism and the social world from which this activism emerges.[80] In the world of theater, Pritham Chakravarthy's one-person performance *Nirvanam* was developed with the active involvement and critique of the *aravani* community and grapples creatively with questions of representation and the body.[81] The entry of these groups and their representations has not been easy and has been fraught with the contradictions of privilege and speaking for others.

When womanhood becomes defined by how one feels, it challenges years of understanding gender as a construct and a product of socialization rather than biology. While this emphatically challenges the biological understanding of gender, it also presupposes an "innateness of gender identity" that feminist thought has been working to deconstruct all along.[82] Thus, individuals socialized as women could identify as men (and vice versa)—and not in order to access male privilege. This set of confusions speaks to the same ground as the trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) dilemma in the US, but Indian feminists have so far been circumspect enough to avoid insisting on exclusion. It remains to be seen how articulations of identity in the language of modernity, with appeals to rights, will affect this dynamic of recognition within the caste order and coupled with exclusion.

Queer, as a category, defies definition. The attendant process of queering, questioning all the categories we hold dear and reshaping our understanding based on these questions, is a perpetual one. Queerness, by definition, involves striking at the roots of respectability, and this, perhaps, accounts in part

Queerness, by definition, involves striking at the roots of respectability, and this, perhaps, accounts in part for the earlier uneasy relationship of the women's movement with queerness.

[80] See Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Naisargi N. Dave, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

[81] Kristen Rudisill, "Pritham Chakravarthy: Performing *Aravanis*' Life Stories," *Asian Theatre Journal* 32, no. 2 (2015): 536–55.

[82] Shah et al., *No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy*, 15.

for the earlier uneasy relationship of the women's movement with queerness.

In 2009 the Delhi High Court held that criminalization of consensual homosexual sex was a violation of the rights to dignity and privacy, within Article 21 on the right to life and personal liberty of the Constitution of India. In 2013, however, the Supreme Court reinstated Section 377, a colonial-era provision of the Indian Penal Code that criminalized homosexual intercourse between consenting adults, after several curative petitions argued that the LGBTQ individuals were a miniscule fraction of the nation's population. Finally, in 2018 a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court pronounced a unanimous verdict reading down Section 377 for being arbitrary and because the LGBTQ community—like any other—was entitled to rights. The striking down of Section 377 has pushed queer sexualities into public discourse, often in the form of a list of identities, as indicated by the term LGBTQIA*.

Queerness, however, may not be accepted when it spills over from these categories, for instance, when it does not look like monogamy.[83] In an example of this queer lens being applied to matters beyond sexuality, Ruth Vanita has pointed out that even nation-states are contingent and "depending on one's point of view, every geographical and social unit shades into its neighbors, and all boundaries are fluid and shifting."[84]

Intersectionality

This fluidity and contestability of categories can be seen as a threat to the nation-state, which in turn seeks to impose order on its people through unreasonable excesses of force. As noted in the section on sexual violence, women living on the borders of the Indian state face greater violence as a result of their ethnicity, religion, and location. This leads scholars to ask, How are bodies discursively marked as inferior, other, and expendable in the service of "national interest"? When does a body become political? Incidents of sexual violence occur with impunity, targeting women from borderlands and marginalized groups such as Kashmiri, Northeastern, Dalit, and Adivasi women. The patriarchal nation-state reacts violently to the mere existence of the bodies it marks as "other." Thus, how can feminism move beyond identities of caste, class, religion, region, sexuality, race, and disability in order to understand how bodies are made normal or otherwise?

We have discussed the long history of the women's movement in India grap-

[83] Shah, "Understanding Trans & Queer Issues."

[84] Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, eds., *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings in Indian Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 25.

pling with these issues. Even as the autonomous women's movement turned away from the class-based movements of the 1950s and 1960s to claim a space for women's issues based on a certain set of common experiences conceptualized as patriarchy, it was beset with instances that challenged this imagined solidarity. Theoretical and political questions regarding positionality and identity were brought to the fore as particular identities began to be articulated, fragmenting universals and leading to "a revised politics of location" that complicated the relationship between experience and knowledge.[85] The categories of feminism, women, gender, and patriarchy were repeatedly exposed as meaning vastly different things to women from different locations and configurations of identities.[86] Initially, these different identities were simply understood as a matter of exclusion and inclusion within the women's movement. Later, the practice of seeing from the perspective of marginality and the concepts of "multiple" and "overlapping" patriarchies came to be articulated.[87] With the advent of queer and trans issues, it became clear that the category "woman" itself had to be rethought.

The concept of intersectionality originated in legal and academic discourse in the US, coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the intersections of race, class, gender, and other axes of oppression. As a category within Indian feminism(s), it has been criticized for being part of a dynamic of imperialism whereby Western categories come to be seen as universal and replace non-Western ones. Having been annexed by global agendas of governmentality and being part of "gender mainstreaming," intersectionality was ill-fated because of its origin in law and criticized as adding nothing to the problem it named.[88] However, other scholars find the concept useful in highlighting and locating complexities in areas we have long struggled with, rather than being merely the retrospective naming of an existing problem.[89] This acceptance can be seen as having a generational aspect to it, with young, internet-savvy feminists overwhelmingly claiming intersectionality, while older feminists are less enamored of the notion, though rarely outright dismissive of it.

Within this generational framing, #MeToo itself has been read as elite, Savarna, and middle class, especially in response to the ill-conceived shaming

[85] Mani, "Multiple Mediations," 26.

[86] Shah et al., *No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy*, 13.

[87] Nivedita Menon, *Seeing Like a Feminist* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012), 9; Sangari, "Politics of Diversity (Part 2)," 3381.

[88] Nivedita Menon, "Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India," *Economic and Political Weekly* L, April 25, 2015, 37–42.

[89] Mary E. John, "Intersectionality: Rejection or Critical Dialogue?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 15, 2015, 74.

of women who did not appear to be vocally supporting the movement. Dalit, trans, and other marginalized women have not received the same level of support when sharing their narratives. Instead, they have faced additional harassment such as rape threats, caste-related slurs, a questioning of their gender identity and of their reputations.[90] This discrepancy has led to discussions about privilege that feed into our understanding of intersectionality.

The Pink Chaddi Campaign, Midnight March, Kiss of Love protests, Queer Pride marches, and Why Loiter are all part of a spate of mobilizations, since the early 2000s, led by urban middle-class women and people of other genders, claiming space and questioning existing notions of morality and respectability.[91] In the world of social media and popular culture, initiatives such as *Gaysi Magazine*, Agents of Ishq, and the Indian Women's Project have worked to make visible the private, the inarticulable, and all the messiness of lives lived beyond

[90] Kiruba Munusamy, "Kiruba Munusamy on Caste and the #MeToo Movement," India Culture Lab, February 27, 2019, video, 8:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmHCPSfkfzQ.

[91] In January 2009, the Sri Ram Sene, a right-wing Hindu group in Mangalore, announced that they would target young couples found together on Valentine's Day. The Sene threatened to conduct marriages for couples found together celebrating their love. Following this announcement, Sene members attacked a pub in Mangalore, beating up women and driving them out of the pub. A few days after this, the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore, started a blog called the Pink Chaddi Campaign calling for women who felt strongly against the Sene's action to send them a "pink chaddi" on Valentine's Day. They also formed the Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women, on Facebook. The Consortium launched a campaign to send pink panties to the Sri Ram Sene, on Valentine's Day. This mode of protest was unprecedented in the Indian context. The symbolism was both "sexually coy and aggressive" and thus troubling for feminists who otherwise shared the Consortium's progressive politics. Tejaswini Niranjana, "Why Culture Matters: Rethinking the Language of Feminist Politics," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 229–35.

On January 5, 2013, a Midnight March was organized by a small group of women in Hyderabad, in order to reclaim urban public space at night. The march attracted the participation of a few thousand people. This unexpected level of participation has since been understood as the result of public outrage following the now famous Nirbhaya case. The event was later followed by the formation of a Facebook group Hyderabad for Feminism in an attempt to harness the energy of that unprecedented march. Hyderabad for Feminism continued to organize events surrounding the claiming of public space for women. Tejaswini Madabhushi, Maranatha Grace T. Wahlang, and Gitanjali Joshua, "Locating 'Hyderabad for Feminism' in the Present Struggle against Violence," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 31, 2015, 38–46.

The Kiss of Love protests took place in 2014 in universities across India and were organized in response to a violent incident of "moral policing" in Marine Drive, Kochi, in November 2014. Several similar protests involving public displays of affection, such as kissing, were organized in solidarity across the country.

Queer Pride marches have been organized across India with growing visibility and participation since the early 2000s; the first such march was in Kolkata in 1999.

norms and available categories.[92] Together, they move beyond protest marches to find creative ways to engage with the political. Their value lies not in their immediate effect, and, importantly, they do not focus on demands such as legislative interventions. Instead, their discursive mode embodies communication and reflexivity that are themselves moments of theorization.[93]

These modes of mobilization are not free of contradiction. Although they provide access to a virtual community, such community may not be sufficiently supportive.[94] Many economically independent young people in urban spaces articulate caste identities, anticaste positions, religious locations, and queerness with a confidence that stems both from their positions of privilege and from the growing accessibility to this political language through new media. These

Many economically independent young people in urban spaces articulate caste identities, anticaste positions, religious locations, and queerness with a confidence that stems both from their positions of privilege and from the growing accessibility to this political language through new media.

The Why Loiter campaign with its social media hashtag #WhyLoiter mobilized women across cities in India to loiter in public spaces, in a bid to make these spaces safer women and address the differentiated rights to public space. The campaign based on a study of the same name sought to make public space(s) safe for women rather than keep women safe by limiting their access to public space. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011). For scholarly engagements with the claiming of space, see contributions by Madhurima Majumder, Pranoo Deshraju and Tejaswini Madabhushi in Anveshi's *Broadsheet on Contemporary Politics* no. 14, "Metropolis as Patriarch? The Feminine Experience of the City", March 14, 2019, https://www.anveshi.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/City-and-Sexuality-English-2.pdf, and Phadke, Khan, and Ranade, *Why Loiter?*

[92] *Gaysi Magazine* is an online media platform formed in 2008 where queer South Asians can share their stories. Agents of Ishq is an online multimedia space dedicated to sex, love, and desire. The Indian Women's Project is a digital archive of marginalized women's oral histories. These three are just examples of the growing number of digital and social media spaces that host conversations and discourse on these themes. See "Who Is Gaysi Family?," About, Gaysi Family, accessed September 11, 2022, https://gaysifamily.com/about/; "Who Are the Agents of Ishq?," About Us, Agents of Ishq, accessed August 7, 2021, https://agentsofishq.com/page/about-us; "FAQS," About Us, The Indian Women's Project, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.theindianwomensproject.com/about.

[93] Supriya Akerkar, "Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India: A Discourse Analysis," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 29, 1995, 5.

[94] Shah, "Understanding Trans & Queer Issues."

spaces too, however, are as liable to be exclusionary as inclusive, as we have seen with the articulations of exclusion within the #MeToo movement. Scholars have noted that the dominant framework at work is that of globalization and neoliberalism, which emphasizes individual choice and freedom.[95] The importance of the legal language of rights in articulating these identities brings into focus the interaction of this terrain with the state and its techniques of governance. As marginal and invisible groups assert visibility and legibility in this idiom, they become subject to the imposition of standardization and uniformity.[96] Despite these dynamics of exclusion, however, these concepts and events have sparked debate and discussion on key feminist categories and the interconnections between them.[97] As contestations over the caste identity of Raya Sarkar, the first compiler of the "List of Sexual Harassers in Academia," indicate, these questions can also take on an identitarian character. Clearly, something deeper is at stake when a marginal identity is claimed and contested with the assumption that it is both relevant and open to public debate.[98]

In the tradition of "naming in hindsight" and consolidating, Chayanika Shah articulates the acquisition of categories such as intersectionality as taking place through the "richness" of listening to and engaging with marginal women and their divergent and intersecting issues.[99] The term percolated through academic and political discourse into social media usage and became a politics to be claimed as a mark of integrity. Even analytical categories like intersectionality can be used in political discourses with an identitarian flavor to delegitimize an opposing viewpoint, as we saw with the arguments surrounding the list of sexual harassers in the introduction. Together, the complexities of these structures of knowledge and identity complicate the production of knowledge itself and prompt attempts to engage with these issues. These dilemmas then feed back into the questions of positionality, subalterneity, standpoint theory, and the complexities of speaking and theorizing for others.

[95] Srila Roy, "#MeToo is a Crucial Moment to Revisit the History of Indian Feminism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 42 (October 20, 2018).

[96] Shah et al., *No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy*, 22.

[97] Roy, "#MeToo Is a Crucial Moment."

[98] Dia Da Costa, "Academically-Transmitted Caste Innocence," *RAIOT* (blog), August 24, 2018, http://www.raiot.in/academically-transmitted-caste-innocence/.

[99] Shah, "Understanding Trans & Queer Issues."

Conclusion

The women's movement(s) and feminism(s) in India have used a wide range of organizing strategies, theoretical approaches, and ways of conceptualizing key issues. This essay has attempted to chart the journey of some of its categories as they travel between sites of activism, protest, law, media, and the university, and to capture the different emphases and complexities that these categories have acquired along the way. The events and the history recounted here, and the concepts examined through them, are by no means exhaustive. They explore only a few strands of a complex and multilayered engagement with gender in contemporary India. Of course, there are other ways to tell this story—for instance, as a history of the feminist movement and its intertwining with other democratic movements and with Marxism. We caution readers of the "danger of a single story"[100] and hope that we have provided an informed sense of the ever-growing, layered, textured, and often chaotic world of Indian feminism(s) through attention to some of the central categories that have sustained both its growth and fragmentation in multiple directions.

[100] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TED Talk, October 8, 2009, video, 19:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg&t=17s.

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