

## *Feminism In India*

Maitrayee Chaudhuri (Ed.), Zed Books, 2005, 359 pp.

### Sanjukta Ghosh

While Western feminists and Western theoretical models of feminism have done a commendable job of deconstructing several age-old binaries that have characterised dominant philosophical and political thinking on gender, what is remarkable is the continued existence and even valorisation of the dichotomy of the West and 'the Rest' in their discourse. Readers on feminist theories, even if they claim to give 'multicultural' or 'global' perspectives on women's studies, are still dominated by Western debates and taxonomies. Feminist perspectives from the global South, if included at all, are usually relegated to one chapter. The implication is that there is uniformity or even agreement on what feminism means in these very diverse cultures of the global South. Different geographies and histories are conflated until difference is lost and one 'third world feminism' becomes interchangeable with another, collapsing into one theoretical model the multiple struggles of very different women under very different conditions. Even in collections that forefront non-Western feminisms, the incredible range, complexities and contested nature of 'feminisms' within different national histories is reduced to a singular unitary voice.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri's collection *Feminism in India* challenges this reduction of local feminisms. [1] Tracing the history of the concept of feminism from colonial times to contemporary India, the anthology explores the infinite variety of Indian feminisms and their theoretical trajectories. As Chaudhuri says in her painstakingly thorough and methodical introduction, the articles chosen for inclusion outline the contours of feminist thought in India and its development into, if not one coherent framework, at least a dialogic body of work.

The taxonomy of feminist theory usually deployed in the West delineates the categories of liberal, Marxist, socialist and black feminisms. Feminist writings in India can neither be pigeonholed into these categories nor be seen to follow the same developmental paths. Yet there has always been a continual engagement with Western theoretical positions not least because people in India have always lived in a world informed by Western reformist ideas such as liberalism and feminism. Thus, Chaudhuri rejects claims that feminism in India has been a Western import. Rather, she says, ideas about women's rights and gender construction have always been

debated in India, but differently. Though there has been a great degree of variance in this theorising both historically and within different women's social movements today, one aspect that runs through all the work is the fact that feminism in India has always had to negotiate around and distinguish itself from Western discourses. As scholars and activists from different parts of the global South have argued, non-Western writers may choose to engage with non-Western thought and praxis. But no such choice exists for those working and writing in the peripheries given that, to use Arundhati Roy's felicitous phrase, we are all subjects of empire (Roy 2004). Hence, Chaudhuri flatly states 'There is no turning away from our engagement with the West' (p. xix).

This assertion is used by Chaudhuri to justify her inclusion in the anthology of writings from the late nineteenth-century onwards. Because feminism as we know it today, she argues, is a product of the modern entity of nation and nationhood, and because colonialism recast many of India's traditional hierarchies, she excludes any pre-colonial writing on gender from the text. This is one of the few flaws in this otherwise significant anthology. As Tharu and Lalita's landmark collection of women writings in India (1991) has shown, there was a prolific exchange of ideas about gender construction and gender norms well before the late 1800s when Tarabai Shinde is supposed to have penned 'A Comparison of Men and Women.' Shinde's essay, included in the second section of Chaudhuri's book, is remarkable for its discussions of the construction of gender norms as a radical critique of patriarchy. Seen as India's pioneering feminist literary critic, Shinde draws links between colonialism and the commodification of women's bodies. In contrast to this polemical piece from an upper-caste Hindu woman is the position of the Oxford educated Parsi Christian reformer Cornelia Sorabji who saw education as the main means by which social transformation of women could be undertaken. Despite her legal training as a barrister in England, Sorabji argued that it was not law but education that could be the panacea sought by reformers attempting to end the practice of child marriage. The third essay included in this section is by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim writer, very popular in her time. Her 'Sultana's Dream' is a feminist utopia which envisions a world where women are in charge of the public sphere. All three essays in this section work as significant counter-narratives to Orientalist historiography which posited brown women in the colonies as helpless and ignorant.

The third section of the book takes up the double engagement with national identity and the woman question. It is through reading the selections included here that one

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can surmise the difficult choices facing women during the period of the nationalist struggles: whether or not to join the national movement; whether or not to support freedom of religion or freedom of women – issues seen as antithetical to one another. Rather than give contemporary commentaries on nationalist texts, Chaudhuri lets historical documents speak for themselves. The 1931 ‘Karachi Resolution’ on what ‘*swaraj*’ or ‘self rule’ in free India would entail, reads more impressively than the U.S. Bill of Rights. However, the gender issue is still marginalised as evidenced by the fact that only one of the resolutions expressly mentions protecting women’s rights (as part of workers’ rights). The 1947 report on ‘Women’s Role in a Planned Economy’ is accompanied by a contextualised commentary by Leela Kasturi who lays out in great detail the lines along which a post-colonial India would dedicate itself to women’s freedom and equality in a plural, multi-religious, multicultural society. Property rights, alimony, custody rights, and child maintenance were all detailed in this remarkable document.

The largest and the most mainstream women’s organisation in India at this time was the All India Women’s Conference. Founded in 1927, it was many-layered and always attempted to reflect the regional diversity of the movement. Chaudhuri’s own chapter on the contentious nature of the debates within this organisation reveals the complexities of the roles women played in the task of nation building. What would constitute the nation? What would be the role of women in independent India? What would the role of women be in the process of nation-building itself? These discussions were fraught with divisions that spoke to religious, caste and other fissures within Indian society.

If feminist writing during twentieth century colonial India was characterised by societal hierarchies and a need to demarcate an Indian identity, feminist debates in post-colonial India dealt with ways in which feminist politics was practised. A section on ‘Feminism in Independent India’ includes some seminal essays that have interrogated both the connections and divergences within Left politics and feminist politics on issues such as agrarian land reform and workers’ rights. Well known contemporary feminist thinkers and organisers like Gail Omvedt and Ilina Sen reiterate the need to re-theorise the fundamental causes of women’s oppression in post-independent India. The sometimes complete disenfranchisement of the rural poor raises fundamental questions about gendered power relations in society. Sen’s essay also discusses some of the Indian women’s movements much celebrated in the West such as the environmental movement called ‘Chipko’ and the labour and cooperative credit movement called SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s

Association). Both these and other struggles challenged the fundamental tenets of the national developmental policy which was predicated on rapid industrialisation at the expense of communities whose lives and livelihoods depended on land and forests. These readings show that since independence much feminist activism and theorising has been geared at developing alternatives to existing state policy and redefining the enfranchisement and empowerment of women.

But what about the poorest sections of the society – the ‘dalits’ (called the ‘untouchables’ in Western scholarly and popular writings)? The last essay in this section shows that the language of class cannot be ignored in any discussion of gender. Sharmila Rege concentrates on non-brahminical reconceptualisations of the feminist agenda in contemporary India. Her urging to reformulate the purely upper-caste historiographies could lead to more nuanced and dialectical understanding of gendered India.

While this section is the thinnest, comprising only three essays, it is perhaps the richest for anyone wishing to learn about the key debates and concerns of grassroots feminist organising in contemporary India. This section of the book alone provides an excellent overview of the multiplicity of voices that introductory texts on global feminism ignore.

Surprisingly, the next section of the book – ‘Challenges to Feminism’ – dealing with the impact of the politics of the Hindu Right, the Hindutva movement and of globalisation, is the least nuanced and least satisfactory section of the anthology. Many of the five essays in this section deal with concerns of post-structuralist feminists, namely representations of gender and the gendered subject positions manufactured through available popular discourses.

Women’s studies and economics volumes have documented well the ways in which financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have actively appropriated and exploited both the language and agenda of feminism to further their goals of privatisation and marketisation. In reference to India, global economic policy documents have linked women’s development and the nation’s development in such a way that women are constructed as ‘good’ subjects because of their thrift and diligent labor. This, by contrast, pits them against those deemed ‘bad’ subjects by these international ‘aid’ agencies, namely their unruly men. This subject position created by discourses emanating from globalisation does not just interpellate rural women but also urban upper-class women, who are

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seen as liberated only if and when they entire the global market system as highly-individualised conspicuous consumers. Whether analysing the huge upsurge in public discourses selling the idea of beauty queens as liberated empowered femininity, print ads that co-opt the language of radical feminism or magazine editorials that equate modernity with conspicuous consumption, the selections all demonstrate the cooptation of the language of feminism by mainstream media and the coordinated backlash against genuine feminist positions. While the readings of popular vernacular press are useful in understanding how globalisation and its offer of a particular model of modernity are negotiated by women in contemporary India, I would have preferred the inclusion of at least one article based on reception studies or audience analysis. In other words, the issue of globalisation of culture is not just a matter of academic interest. It has impacted in real terms the ways in which women construct a political identity using cultural icons. How has the puncturing of cultural boundaries affected this process? How are hybrid identities disrupting the search for a peculiarly and specifically 'Indian' feminist identity?

The impetus for the whole volume seems to be dictated by this search for the Indian roots of feminism and the possibilities of an 'authentic' or 'indigenous' feminism. The first and last sections of the book take up these concerns in innovative ways. While the essays in the opening pages of the book lay out the basics of feminism demonstrating the extent of feminist commitments in India and the need for the theorisation of sexuality within feminist formulations, they also provide an understanding of the 'anti-feminist' position and the reluctance of a vast number of Indians to use the 'F-word.' Madhu Kishwar's landmark essay 'Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist' is just one voice in the struggle for an indigenous feminism that has raged on in India from the colonial times.

The woman question in India historically has always been linked to anti-imperialist struggles whether for nationhood or an 'authentic' Indian identity. Much of theorising of Indian feminism has articulated the national question with the 'sanitised' image of Hindu upper-caste women. The construction of a nationalist rhetoric that erased internal differences has been tantamount to emptying India's history of all its internal conflicts. 'It is at once a claim for a distinct non-Western identity and a brushing away of internal differences,' Chaudhuri asserts (p. xxi). In fact one of the most significant contributions of feminist theorising in the last two decades in India has been a sustained critique of essentialist notions of both the Indian nation and woman. This quest for indigeneity has opened up political

possibilities to engage with tradition and that are antithetical to fundamentalist assertions. In the last section of the book, Vidyut Bhagat explores the concept of tradition and she uses Marathi folklore to open up radical possibilities for the future of Indian feminism. Her essay, useful as it is, reminded me of Frantz Fanon's warning that a return to 'tradition' paradoxically might also limit efforts at liberation because it re-inscribes an essentialist, absolute and fixed notion of culture and tradition. This caution is perhaps also expressed by Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in her essay on goddess-inspired Hindu feminism. As she says, this tradition has not only marginalised and alienated women in minority communities, but has also opened by possibilities of further exploitation of these very communities by the Hindu Right and the demarcation of more restrictive and repressive cultural lines. All the essays in the opening and last sections speak to each other, contesting the assumptions of each writer in a truly dialogic way. The end result is a nuanced conceptualisation of Indian feminisms.

As Oyeronke Oyewumi has written in the context of African feminisms, much critical writing by feminist scholars from the global South has been appropriated and tokenised in Western academia (Oyewumi 2003). She and many others have pointed out that this 'objectification' is predicated on the silencing of third world voices in the articulation of their own realities; this despite the proliferation of 'multicultural', 'multiracial' and 'transnational' sections in women's studies and feminist anthologies. Maitrayee Chaudhuri's collection deconstructs this objectification of 'third world' feminisms and reconstructs a plural, contradictory, complex notion of what feminist paradigms mean in India. The anthology demonstrates that the heterogeneity of Indian experience and the ever-changing gender relations has necessitated the articulation of multiple feminisms and multiple theoretical frameworks striated with common concerns. These formulations have developed and transformed over time in response to the material realities of daily conditions of existence, ideological sensitivity to gender issues, the linguistic and political competencies, and historical events. Given that the articles are written, not by U.S.-based scholarly academics writing about India but, by activists and thinkers grounded in India and involved in its myriad feminist political battles, this book should be seen as a definitive work on gender scholarship in India.

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Sanjukta Ghosh teaches in the Communication Department and in the Women's Studies program at Castleton State College. Her forthcoming book examines representations of South Asians in the American media.

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### Notes

- [1]A reprint should rectify some editorial failings. Several citations were missing in the bibliographies, especially in the introduction; some sentences were cut off midway in articles that had been excerpted for this collection, and a subject index should be provided.