

Editorial

Special Issue: Gender Activism in India

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INTRODUCTION

Gender activism in India has a rich and complex history as befits the second largest country in the world, by population. There have been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of notable feminist activists in India who have fought for gender equality and rights, and campaigned against gender-based violence. One such early activist was Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), who was a Dalit woman who campaigned successfully for access to education for girls, setting up many schools open to children of what was then the lowest social caste in India (traditionally denigrated as ‘Untouchable’), campaigning more widely against gender-based violence, female infanticide, and the killing and burning of widows, and victims who were raped and pregnant. Together with her activist Muslim partner Fatima Sheikh, they provided vital education to marginalised women, recognising the necessity of what in the west would today be called intersectional feminism – the link between gender and poverty, whether rendered through social class or caste. Their friend and associate Tarabai Shinde published the booklet ‘*Stri Purush Tulana*’ in 1882, a critique of patriarchy and the caste system in 19th century India, which can be considered as the first modern feminist publication in India.

What we see from the very beginning of feminist activism in India is this cogent link between gender and caste oppression, and religious culture. This methodology of a type of intersectional analysis was evident in early feminist activism and writing, and continues today, not least in the recent research we present to you in this special issue. However, we need to be careful not to impose an analytical method based epistemologically in USA black feminist research – intersectionality – upon a non-western country such as India, which has its own concrete types of difference and intellectual approaches for thinking about them. Context and history are important, and to read Indian feminism through contemporary western theories of postcoloniality, poststructuralism, or postmodernism is rather to impose frameworks that although dialogic, do not quite fit onto India’s separate development as a nation, nor its own intellectual histories. For readers curious to read further about these debates, Maitrayee Chaudhuri has written an erudite and incisive introductory commentary to thinking about such issues called ‘Feminism in India: The Tale and the Telling’ (2012),¹ which tries to avoid framing Indian feminism within western academic frameworks.

Thinking about the scope of women’s/gender studies in India, as of the last count in 2017, there were 163 Women’s Studies and Gender Studies centres across the nation,² geographically spread across all major regions. Women’s Studies has flourished in Indian universities, the watershed moment in social awareness coming after the 1974 report ‘Towards Equality’, published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which was appointed by the Indian government in 1972 to produce a survey report. Feminist activism in India was rising in the early 1970s, and it was the Towards Equality report that highlighted the distressing themes of gender inequality across all aspects of public and private life, and the despairingly universal provenance of gender-based violence. Women’s Studies became a recognised discipline in 1977, following on the heels of the people’s activism. The National Conference in Women’s Studies in 1981 led to the creation of the Indian Association of Women’s Studies

¹ Chaudhuri’s commentary is available on the website *Cairn Info* (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-tiers-monde-2012-1-page-19.htm>).

² See, for example, Geentanjali Ganjoli, Women Studies Departments in Indian Universities face threat of closure (<https://policystudies.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/2017/07/24/women-studies-departments-in-indian-universities-face-threat-of-closure/>).

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which meant that feminist researchers could network for the first time, share more knowledge effectively, and receive professional recognition. For histories of feminist education see further Anu Aneja's 'Women's and Gender Studies in India' (2019), and for specific understandings of the Indian context for feminism we would recommend for example (of many possible examples) Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh's (2020) 'Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader' – both published by Routledge/Taylor and Francis. Those readers wanting to know more about contemporary feminism in India would do well to check out digital platforms on social media such as the Facebook page 'Feminism in India' which has 90,000 followers, or online magazines such as *Feminism in India*³ which is also a great resource for students and for discussion. The topic of gender activism in India, is like its referent – huge, diverse, fascinating, and powerfully moving – we offer a snapshot of current gender activism in this issue of *Feminist Encounters* which we hope you will find interesting.

There are 9 articles in the special issue which forms the first part of this publication, and then 3 further articles in the general section, which are rounded off with the three book reviews.

In their article 'Forging Fraught Solidarities: Friendship and Feminist Activism in South Asia', Nithila Kanagasabai and Shilpa Phadke discuss the importance of friendship in Indian feminism. They argue that friendship is 'deeply political' and is therefore 'a way of doing activism'. Friendship forms a bridge over caste, cultural and political differences and has been overlooked in research about gender activism, but is it enough? Their article explores the nuances of and changes in feminist friendships through discussions with Indian feminists.

Anandita Pan's article, 'Gender, Caste and Subjectivity: Revisiting the #MeToo Movement in India', considers the #MeToo movement in India through the positionality of the speaker. Her examination of the role of intersectional identities of caste, class, and gender in determining subjecthood, and solidarity, shows how ironically the #MeToo movement in India reproduces casteist, classist and sexist hierarchies and replicates the erasure of Dalit women in society.

In "'Please Don't Go Yet': The Voice and Texture of Indian Women's Campaign Rhetoric', Subhasree Chakravarty deconstructs the gendered nature of three female political candidates' speeches. Her study reveals 'an exhilarating battle of campaign rhetorics fraught with language restrictions and gender dynamics'. Chakravarty links the political speeches to the contexts in which they arose and from this broadens her study to the state and future of female rhetoricians in India.

In 'Sex-workers Defying Patriarchy and Challenging State Reform and Rehabilitation Projects in India: Voices from the Margins', Shriya Patnaik explores the resistance of sex-workers to state reform through local channels of grassroots organisation, performative culture, and collective action. Her participants leverage various modalities of resistance to the state's current ways of dealing with them because existing state reform projects often violate subjects' bodily autonomy and act as moral discipliners, exposing them to systemic and institutionalised violence.

Next, Antoinette E. DeNapoli considers gender activism from the angle of female religious leaders in 'Can a Woman be a True Guru? Female Hindu Gurus' Grassroots Religious Activism and the Performativity of Saintliness at the *Kumbh Mela*'. She engages with two such leaders who take different approaches to the role of women – one preaches that women should enjoy the same rights as men, while the other maintains that women are different and therefore require different rights. DeNapoli argues that, through performance of the 'rhetoric of saintliness,' the gurus 'heighten or reverse sex-role stereotypes embedded in mainstream representations of "good" gurus in order to mobilise gender reform in patriarchal *akhārā* culture'.

Aastha Tyagi's article, "'You call us goons! Have you seen how their women act?": Gendering as a protest strategy among Hindu nationalist students in New Delhi', looks at gender in *Akshil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP), the largest political student organisation in the world. ABVP is 'one of the strongest arms of the largest and most influential coalition of Hindu nationalist organisations ... in promoting Hindu nationalist ideology to an extremely influential demographic: the young, university-educated, and urban populace'. Tyagi asks, 'As a member of the largest Hindu nationalist organisation in the world, what does it mean to protest in the present political moment - with the knowledge that there is state and institutional support on your side?' And to answer this, she follows the stories of three young party members and how they respond to violence.

Moving away from nationalist student protests, the three final articles in the special issue concern the women-led Shaheen Bagh protest of 2019 to 2020 in Delhi. This protest was made as a response to the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the police action that followed. Most of the protestors were Muslim women, and their methods were non-violent.

The first article, 'Transnationalising *Dadis* as Political/Activist Subjects', is written by Radhika Gajjala, Emily Edwards, Debipreeta Rahut, Ololade Margaret Faniyi, Bedadyuti Jha, Jhalak Jain, Aiman Khan, and Saadia Farooq. This article shows how the '*dadis* (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh' emerged as political subjects in the Twittersphere. The authors use a multi-methods approach that includes qualitative interviews with local and

³ See <https://feminisminindia.com/>.

transnational activists and related actors as well as a situated feminist data analytics and critical digital humanities approach to examining big social data online.

Next, in ‘Shaheen Bagh: Gender, Affects, and the Graphic Narrative of Protest’, Pujarinee Mitra considers the protest through the graphic novel, *Shaheen Bagh A Graphic Recollection* by Ita Mehrotra (2021). The protesters mobilised affects primarily through sharing food, singing songs and the display of artwork. Mehrotra perpetuates this form of resistance with her own artwork. Mitra examines this work through the intersecting discourses of South Asian Feminisms, Contemporary South Asian literature, and Affect Theory.

The third and last article on the topic of the Shaheen Bagh protest is by Yash Sharma and Shatakshi Singh and is titled ‘Shaheen Bagh and the Politics of Protest in the Anti-CAA Movement in India’. It explores ‘the pathways and politics of resistance’ within the anti-CAA/NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizenship) protests in India. The authors describe the protest as ‘a powerful symbol of resistance against, and reimagining of, hegemonic notions of nationalism, secularism, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary India’.

In addition to the above, in the General Articles section of this issue we have included two further research articles and an interview. The interview, ‘Dance, Gender, and Activism in Pakistan: Interview with Performer-Activist Sheema Kermani’ is by Priyanka Basu. In it she interviews Sheema Kirmani, a performer and activist based in Karachi, Pakistan. Kirmani has raised awareness of violence against women and women’s empowerment and has fought for social justice through her organisation, *Tehrik-e-Niswan*. Additionally, Kirmani traces her educational journey and influences from her childhood dance lessons to her student days in the UK.

In ‘Mothering and Radical Selfcare: An Autoethnography of participating in a Facebook parenting group’ Smitha Sasidharan Nair and Rajesh Kalrivayil’s autoethnography explores the development of their own parenting style through their engagement with a Facebook parenting group. Their theoretical approach draws from Audre Lorde’s idea of radical self-care to analyse the interactions on the online group on empowered mothering and self-care.

The final article we are pleased to present is Katrín Ólafsdóttir and Jeff Hearn’s “‘How did this happen?’: Making retrospective, present and prospective sense of intimate relationships where men have been violent’. The authors consider the narratives of three men who identify as perpetrators of violence and three women who identify as victims/survivors of IPV. Their analyses focus on how the participants present their relationships, employing the notion of affective–discursive practices. In the article the authors show how men make sense of their own behaviour under these circumstances and how shame functions as a regulatory emotion.

We end this issue with three book reviews: Arianne M. Gaetano reviews *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* by Fran Martin; Siyang Cao reviews *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance* by Bao Hongwei; and Brian Curtin reviews *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men’s Pornography: Deconstructing the Big Black Beast* by Desmond Francis Goss.

We hope you will enjoy delving into the rich and informative contributions in this issue!

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