

Feminism in South Asia

Feminist Anthropology in the World: Transnational Dialogues

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The Geographical Location

- My focus and data is from India but since most of what is known as South Asia was till very recent times one political entity (mostly British India) and remains to a large extent a cultural area with similar values sharing similar moral universe, whatever can be said for India in terms of gender constructs and feminist methodology is fairly applicable to the entire region. Diversity is internal to all the separate political entities of South Asia as it depends more on religion, linguistic communities and ethnohistory than on the overt geo-political identities. For example there is more in common with West Bengal of India and Bangladesh than of the former with, say Punjab (India). Similarly Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils may have a lot in common.
- Most of what I have to say therefore belongs to a larger cultural region than is limited to what is known as India at present.

Waves of Feminism

- Depending upon how we define feminism and consequently feminist anthropology, there is a possibility of defining several waves of feminist thought and actual social mobilization in this region for deconstructing gender stereotypes.
- Although there are mythical accounts of an ancient golden age of women's emancipation, that is more politically derived (Hindu propaganda) than based on factual data. Historically, we can identify at least one wave of feminism, if we understand it as a movement to liberate women (and other marginal groups) from social discrimination and marginalization, around the 10-12th century (C.E) rooted in a break-away religious movement known as the Bhakti Movement (Devotional movement). This movement directly opposed itself to Brahmanical Patriarchy that enforced various rules and regulations and in particular marginalised women and the lower castes.

Bhakti Movement

- This movement preached direct communion with the divinity through the medium of pure devotion and love and urged people to do away with the mediation of the Brahmins, priests and elaborate rituals.
- This was joined by several key women devotees , including the Rajput princess Mira Bai, who, as legends go, spurned her royal husband and the royal priests to leave the palace and roam with the mendicants on the streets, to preach her love for the divine Krishna. There were also persons from lower castes and those of ambiguous social status.
- However the influence of the Bhakti movement did not last and by the 16th century of so, Indian society was in the grip of orthodox Hinduism as well as Islam, that restricted and curtailed women to a very large extent.

The Anti-Colonial, Freedom Movement

- From 16th to 19th century, the age was dark for women of all descriptions, female infanticide, burning of upper caste Hindu widows, marriage of underage girls, teen age mother hood, polygyny and dowry continued unabated and women were deprived of education, freedom and any kind of personal liberties. Lower caste women were sexually exploited in the public domain while upper caste women were exploited by the men of their own extended families.
- During the colonial period some men encouraged their daughters to get formal education and that brought some enlightenment to a few women of the middle and upper classes. From this section, many women joined the anti-colonial movement that set the stage for a wave of feminist thought and actions.

Women in the freedom struggle

- Like in the West , feminist movements in the sub-continent, to begin with, came from women of the privileged classes. The goals were primarily to liberate women from familial violence, cultural forms of exploitation and torture and to give them a sense of their own worth.
- During the freedom struggle some women were encouraged by their husbands/ fathers to come out into the public to join the men in the struggle. This was the first step towards women entering the public domain. Yet most had to depend on male members of the family to be able to come out.

The social embeddedness of Feminist Agenda

- The reasons for giving this background is to emphasize that feminism, apart from its universal derivations (in the domination of women) has its cultural and historical locations from where it derives its specific agendas. Women in South Asia were not located in nuclear families, in direct relation to a man with whom they were sexually attached. They were embedded in larger kin units where they interacted mostly with other women. They were not looking for sexual liberation and the kind of academic theories of universal domination that western feminists were looking for, were not part of their concern.
- South Asian feminist movement, the really indigenous one, and not one borrowed from the west, focused on survival of women, their social identity and their personal growth. Education, a safe marriage and home, protection of their human rights, life and limb and an ability to survive, were the main concerns.

Post-Colonial position

- Like all movements linked to specific social conditions, the feminist movement took a back seat as soon as India and other countries on the sub-continent attained freedom. The nature of political regimes that each country opted for, also affected the way women were conceptualized and what kind of rights they received. India professed a Constitution that gave equal rights to all its citizens, but although there was no argument on universal franchise, women's lot remained and still remains highly compromised.
- Illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, caste linked values and morality, the persistence of Brahmanical patriarchy are some of the issues that feminists in India have to deal with. Issues of basic survival come paramount in a country where females are finding it difficult even to be born. Where child marriage and teen pregnancies are rampant even in the 21st century and even educated middle class parent's sacrifice the interests of their daughters to promote that of their sons.

Western Feminism and South Asian Feminism

- Feminist anthropology must pay heed to historically derived situations to understand the primary concerns of feminists in different regions of the world.
- As a South Asian anthropologist, I often found the concerns of the western feminists with sexual liberation and sexual identity, of less concern to me practically than the concerns of human rights and social justice that has concerned feminist thought and philosophy in South Asia from the time one can identify any kind of movement that can broadly be accommodated under the rubric of feminism.

Major concerns of South Asian Feminists

- More than liberty and freedom, in South Asia, women's concerns have focussed on survival and at the next step for identity. A female child has less chances of being born at all, if born she is likely to die of neglect, or be married at a very young age, subjected to marital rape, does not have any control over her own body. She may be forced to abort her own female foetuses, neglect her female children and be pushed to produce male offspring's for her husband's lineage.
- A majority suffer from acute poverty, it is most common in India for women to be anaemic, suffering from various diseases yet being forced into frequent pregnancies. Widow's among the upper castes are prevented from getting married, while men are encouraged to remarry even at advanced ages. Few women get opportunities for higher education, even from better off families, as parents debate whether to spend for a girl's education or for her marriage. In almost every caste and class, there is son preference and girl children are treated as second grade citizens even within the same family.

- Women are generally muted, especially when they are young. Only matriarchs, especially mothers of sons acquire some degree of social prestige.
- Women get prestige not and never as individuals but only in relation to their family ties and kin position.
- Feminists have for long fought to give women their rightful place in society, prevent early marriage, encourage education and fought against femicide and violence against women. To some extent they are striving to give women an identity, individual or social irrespective.

Women's strengths in South Asia

- This is not to say that women have no strength in South Asia. Because of the segregation of male and female spaces, as within the structure of the house and even outside of it; women have their own domain, and men theirs. It is because of this, apart from not being thrown against each other all the time, issues of homosexuality, transsexuality and other sexual aberrations were hidden behind the four walls of large extended families, large households with many members had plenty of scope to indulge in some of their fancies, as has often been depicted in fiction and even history. The eunuchs for example played a key role as a bridge between the male and female quarters of aristocratic houses. They still have a major ritual position on society.

Ritual Strength

- Women are not trivialised but accorded respect, especially in their role as mothers and home makers. Although this also means that they have to live up to expectations that are highly demanding. The acknowledgement of women's moral superiority has been a burden and feminists who refuse to abide by the role expectations of extreme compliance to this model, are often decried and marginalized.
- Women for example are preferred dead than dishonoured

Feminist Anthropology in South Asia

- Feminist anthropology in South Asia must recognize that women are embedded in larger kinship and community relations and men and women cannot be isolated as dyads, as has been the basic theoretical paradigm for western feminists.
- Feminism therefore has to battle the larger social relationships of caste, religion and associated patriarchies. There is also the need to fight against poverty and deprivations of all kinds. A majority of women suffer from malnutrition and hunger and ill health need to be prioritized over freedom.

Feminist Anthropology (contd)

- Women have been fighting for their identity as many times a woman even loses her name as she is buried in the kinship roles that she plays throughout her life. But at the same time kinship offers women their much needed social security as she is able to draw upon various relationships to males in the family as is not only dependent upon the husband. A woman is therefore able to have non-sexual relationships with men who often provide much greater support than her male partner.
- Feminism at least for South Asia therefore must look upon women as playing multiple roles other than her sexual one and drawing power from them. She needs to be assessed as part of a larger kin group and community, where issues of deprivation and human rights are important parameters.