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Is there any specifically Indian Feminist Theory? We have British Socialist Feminism, French Feminist Theory and the Third World and Minority Feminisms of the United States. However, one is hard put when it comes to thinking about any integrated approach that one could refer to under the rubric of Indian Feminist Theory. Cognition of this apparent lacuna leads one to pose certain critical questions. Is it that theory, even within feminism, can only be produced in the metropolitan centres of the world? Or is there a straitjacketing — a certain hegemonic universalising impetus — operative in the way in which we think about theory internationally? What does theory mean to us within feminist contexts in India?

There has been no dearth of observations by Indian feminist scholars regarding inadequate theorizing in the women's movement. Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah¹ comment on the lack of significant theorizing on issues of dowry and rape, reflecting that our approach to these social phenomena has been merely reactive, one of "firefighting" only (13). Srimati Basu² acknowledges that we have done a lot to mark moments of resistance, but asks rhetorically what we make of these gestures: "Do they lead us to a liberatory feminist politics, or merely to a celebration of small lost moments of nay — saying?" (186). Mary John and Janaki Nair³ refer to the lacuna regarding issues of sexuality in terms of "a conspiracy of silence ..., whether within political and social movements or in scholarship" (1) and Ruth Vanita's critique is that the reluctance of the women's movement to question gender and sexuality categories has fostered a stress on critique equity rather than liberation" (534)"⁴.

Such critiques could be read to signify that there is indeed a lack of theorising in the Indian feminist context — or that it is limited by a dependence on western theoretical frameworks. Or, alternately, one could recognize that all these challenges have been raised in the field of contemporary feminist activism, and ask whether there has been any substantial theorising in other realms. Two such prime areas are those of history and literature⁵, which have the added advantages of hindsight and distance that are conducive to theorising, and also provide ground for theories that could have bearings on the present and the future.

Again, however, one is hard put to locate any obvious texts that could be designated as "theoretical" in the established sense of the word, that is, comprising pure conceptual abstractions and analyses of phenomena. This then brings back the other questions I had raised earlier, regarding whether this is a straitjacketed way of thinking about theory, and what theory means to us in the Indian feminist context.

I wish to draw attention to the fact that the contemporary inheritance of feminist theory in India is an embedded theory, a theory that not only emerges from specific historical contexts and standpoints — as all theories do — but also comes to us embodied in historiography and literary and cultural analyses. A landmark instance of such work

was *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*⁶, which was edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, first published in 1989, and has been reprinted several times since. Its central aim was to “understand the historical processes which reconstitute patriarchy” (1), in the colonial state and in the anti-colonial movements. Its choice of the colonial period was only apt for one of the first pioneering works in feminist historiography and feminist theory to be published from amongst the post-colonial nations of the world. So was its focus on the constant reformulation of patriarchies across the triple spectres of Empire, Nation and Community, for any feminist historiography and theory produced in a postcolonial nation cannot but take into account the interrelations between these.

The essays in this volume were brought together in assertion of the need for such studies upon which to build our understandings of the present, as the theoretical insights that emerged from studies of the colonial context would also prove to be useful at other conjunctures in history: “Patriarchies after all, are still being reconstituted, and not all the modalities of this process have altered.” (25) It is no coincidence either that most of the work that went into these essays was done in the decade following on the heels of the emergence of the contemporary women’s movement in India, in the context of the nationwide reassertion of democratic rights by citizens’ groups during and after the Emergency in the seventies.

Recasting Women was a landmark in that it was not just the first substantial collection of rigorous work in gendered historiography, but also, and as much, a theoretical elaboration of feminist scholarship in India. Its most significant characteristic was that it deliberately and consciously opted in favour of specific studies in cultural history, rather than choose to develop generalised theoretical formulations. In fact, one is much reminded of the historical mode adopted by ER Thompson for *The Making of the English Working Class* or Eugene Genovese’s *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*,⁸ both groundbreaking in terms of their theoretical import, when one reads the justifications for materially specific studies made by the editors of *Recasting Women*:

.....given the regional, class and caste variation of patriarchal practices and their diverse histories, it is necessary to have specific studies, in order to build an adequate theoretical basis. Overarching theoretical formulations are helpful and necessary to undertake any work, but they need constant testing and overhauling by historically and materially specific studies of patriarchal practice, social regulation and cultural production. (1)

Thus one remarkable aspect of this collection, in a time when most cultural and historical theory was being produced in the West, was its focus on materially specific studies of Indian cultural history that would generate theoretical insights about specifically Indian gendered colonial conjunctures. It centred attention on the dialectical relations of “feminisms” and patriarchies in the inventions of the colonial state and in the anti-colonial movements, establishing perspectives from the standpoint of once colonised peoples in the western ethnocentric field of colonial studies.

Other noteworthy aspects of this historiographically embodied theorising that marked its relative autonomy from the hegemony of western theoretical frameworks were that almost all the essays here held on to evaluation long after it had become unfashionable to do so; rooted themselves in narrative long before it became fashionable to do so; and combined the post-structuralist attention to difference with the political imperative of evaluation. Much read essays in this volume, such as those of Uma Chakravarti's on the Vedic *Dasi*, Vasantha Kannabiran and K.Lalitha's on Women in the Telengana People's Struggle, and Prem Chowdhry's "Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial India" are exemplary in this respect.

Recasting Women was however not alone in its emphasis on the reconstitution of patriarchies across Empire, Nation and Community, as a lot of other important work done during and after the same period demonstrates. The debates on sati, which included Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's own work (not included in this volume), and Lata Mani's and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's⁹ too, highlighted the ways in which the body of the woman became the *site*, not the central *concern*, across the trajectories of colonial intervention, the Indian nationalist response to it, and the subsequent arguments about the cultural autonomy of a community and its rights to privilege sati, arguments which in fact fed into the right wing Hindutva politics of contemporary times. In the context of the exclusion of women writers from literary canons, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's anthologies, *Women Writing in India*, vols 1 & 2¹⁰ focused on issues of feminist aesthetics and the celebration of female desire in the face of colonial and nationalist politics. And in tracing the publishing history of Muddupalani's *Radhikasantwanam* from its celebration in the 17th century Thanjavaur Court, through proscription by the British and championing by the nationalists, to its virtually being driven underground again after independence, they chart out a trajectory symptomatic of the collusions between colonial and nationalist patriarchies that succeeded in effacing much women's writing out of literary canons in India. The other critical area of feminist scholarship in India has been partition studies, where the work of Veena Das,¹¹ Urvashi Butalia¹² and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin¹³ has established in no uncertain terms the ways in which traumatic events that completely transformed or put an end to women's lives at the moment of independence were dislocated from the status of the family to that of community and nation; where women's sexuality and lives became hostage to communal warfare; and where the norms of newly formed nation states, regarding the recovery of abducted women, paradoxically denied women the very rights of secularism and citizenship upon which both these nation states had been founded.

One central concern that unites this scholarship is that of relating the ideological to the experiential, whether it be in terms of revealing the chasms between the symbolic constructions of womanhood and the material realities of their lives and actions, or in the form of highlighting the hegemonic ideological manipulations of existing divisions of labour and systems of production and reproduction. These studies focus on the appropriations of culture and representation as critical in the reformulation of patriarchies. Culture is addressed as the site where ideologies take shape and symbols function, and simultaneously the terrain where everyday practices are structured. Representation is tackled as the vehicle for mediation between the symbolic and women's

experiences of everyday life; that which performs crucial functions in the dialectic of social processes, theoretically significant because it issues a challenge to established *discourses of materiality* through a feminist analysis of *materiality itself* questioning dominant representations of organisation and ruling by confronting them with women's experiences of these organisational and ruling systems.

Cultural analysis in these studies thus functions as political and/or epistemological *intervention* as much as it serves as critique of patriarchal ideologies. Such analysis makes it possible to locate specific ways in which to challenge and change the "rational" optimal functioning of dominant systems, of the totality, which is in fact "the optimum in irrationality" based on the "barbarous suppression" of contradictions.¹⁴ Since the "rationality" of the system is based on the suppression of the interests of dominated groups, this critique of everyday life, which reveals modes of suppression, becomes an *ethical critique*. It is thus this *ethical critique*, based on the dialectic between the material and the discursive realms, that can facilitate the reintroduction of hitherto suppressed women's reason into the systems of "irrationality".¹⁵

If one were to look for western parallels in such theorising, then standpoint feminism, as elaborated by scholars such as Dorothy Smith (1987)¹⁶ and Sandra Harding (1991)¹⁷ obviously comes the closest. It is significant, however, that much of standpoint feminism was formulated at the same time as the feminist scholarship I am referring to in the Indian context. The former was unquestionably rich in methodological sophistication, in its *positing* of multiple intersections of structures of power and in its emphasis on the process or form of ruling, rather than the rigid manifestations of it. However, it was limited to an analysis of western capitalist patriarchies. On the other hand, the Indian feminist scholarship I am referring to went directly into analysing the relations between the organisation and experience of sexual politics, *and* the concrete historical and political forms of colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, communalism and casteism

The significant difference is that while the former was formulated in highly theory—centric academic contexts and developed into a theoretical "school" that proved to be extremely influential in women's studies, specially in N. America, the latter evolved embedded in specific historical and literary studies, characterised by an immediacy that helped sharpen the political perspectives of our concrete and specific historical and cultural awareness.

While appreciating the wealth of Indian feminist scholarship is necessary for being able to build upon it, an assessment of its limitations is even more critical for this task. And one of the glaring blind spots that need to be addressed urgently is the relation of the feminist movement, and feminist scholarship, to caste and Dalit feminist politics. In this context, Sharmila Rege charges the mainstream feminist movement for its brahminism, and theoretically for limiting itself to a framework of "difference" that effectively serves to marginalise Dalit women's issues. She emphasises the need for "a shift of focus from 'difference' and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression to historically locate the difference of dalit women's voices in their real struggles." (40-41)¹⁸ Her argument for a more inclusive revisioning of

contemporary feminist politics from the standpoint of the Dalit woman clearly reveals that while Indian feminist scholarship may have developed sophisticated theoretical approaches in its critique of Empire and Nation, there are significant lacunae in the self-critique of the mainstream Indian women's movement. And this is a view that would be strongly endorsed by those seeking to broaden the movement's perspectives on sexuality too. Some of the lacunae, albeit, are not due only to our blind spots, or deliberate evasion of issues threatening to our constructions of self, but also to the lack of adequate historical perspective on the current crises of our times. How patriarchies are reformulating themselves in the context of contemporary globalisation and the resurgence of gendered communal violence now unprecedented in its systematically planned and unashamedly performative quality,¹⁹ are concerns that need urgent sustained attention, if social transformation is at all contingent on scholarship and theoretical analysis.

References:

1. 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.
2. Srimati Basu, 'The Bleeding Edge: Resistance as Strength and Paralysis' in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 7:2 (2002).
3. Mary John and Janaki Nair, eds., *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. N. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
4. Ruth Vanita, 'Thinking Beyond Gender in India', in Nivedita Menon ed., *Gender and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
5. This is certainly not to imply that scholarship in such disciplines does not fall within the realm of activism - in fact the recent academic battles over Indian historiography stand testimony to the contrary; so does the contribution of Indian feminist scholarship in shaping the women's movement ever since the publication of *Towards Equity: Report of the Commission on the Status of Women* in the seventies. I refer to academia as one of the sites of feminist activism, and one that specifically interrogates the connections between history and the present.
6. Published by Kali for Women, N. Delhi.
7. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Random House Inc. Vintage Books, 1966.
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11. Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. N. Delhi: OUR 1995.
12. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. N. Delhi: Viking, 1998.

13. Rim Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Border and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. N. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
14. C.F. Theodor Adorno: "Sociology of Knowledge and its Consciousness" in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. New York: Urizen Books, 1978. 452-65.
15. Kumkum Sangari's more recent book, *Politics of the Possible* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), is an outstanding example of such dialectical and ethical critique.
16. Dorothy E. Smith: *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987.
17. Sandra Harding: *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
18. Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position'. *EPW*, October 31, 1998.
19. Important beginnings have been made in this context such as Purushottam Agarwal's 'Surat, Savaarkar & Draupadi: Legitimizing Rape as a Political Weapon' in Eds. Tanika Satkar and Urvashi Butalia: *Women on the Hindu Right*, N.Delhi: Kali for women, 1995; Tanika Sarkar, 'Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women in Hindu Rashtra', *EPW*, July 13, 2002; Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity and Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, N.Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.