

## Feminist Concepts in Time and Space Perspectives from India

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I am truly honoured to have been requested by the Institute of Advanced Studies at Shimla to deliver the eighteenth public lecture in memory of Professor Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, India's much venerated philosopher statesman. It is a further privilege to be doing so here in Trivandrum at this premier centre for interdisciplinary research in the fields of the social sciences and development studies.

By way of introduction I should perhaps begin with a confession: Philosophy was my first love, the discipline I sought out in an early stage of my intellectual formation and from which I therefore demanded all the answers. Even though I subsequently moved on to a more eclectic inter-disciplinary world of ideas and action, drawing more often from the social sciences within which feminism came to occupy a central place, I think that – like all first loves – something has stayed with me after all these years. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan himself is largely remembered for his efforts to 'bridge the gap between East and West'. Far be it for me to even begin to delve into Radhakrishnan's thought or offer anything by way of commentary or critique. As you will see shortly, the kind of thinking that I will be engaging in here works at a rather different level from his own. Nonetheless, I am deeply inspired by the spirit manifested in his inaugural address at the IAS in 1965, at a time when he was the President of India: "The



greatest event of our age is the meeting of cultures, meeting of civilizations, meeting of different points of view, making us understand that we should not adhere to any one kind of single faith, but respect diversity of belief. That is what we should attempt to do. ...It is not a sign of weakening faith; it is a sign of increasing maturity.... Let us therefore realize that this increasing maturity should express itself in this capacity to understand what other points of view are.”

In my presentation today I hope to open up the space-time of that seemingly most Western of concepts, namely ‘feminism’. Most of us rightly associate feminism with the women’s movement, and with political struggles for women’s rights across the world. However, we would fall far short of understanding the scope of such struggles if we did not pay attention to the kinds of knowledges and concepts that have gone hand in hand with such movements. Also central to this endeavour is an engagement with the diversities and differences of ‘East’ and ‘West’ that Radhakrishnan spoke of. As we are well aware, these diversities have never been benign, having been undergirded instead by the hierarchy between the first and third worlds, or the West and the non-West.

My attempt here will be to offer an alternate mode of engagement with what is perceived as the problem of the third world’s theoretical dependency on the first . Considerable concern and debate has quite rightly focused on the fact that relationships of power and inequality from colonial times to the present have not only taken material form. Indeed, the role that knowledges of the ‘East’ played in making possible the very durability of western colonialism has been a foundational tenet at least since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), and should not require rehearsal here. Other dimensions of relationships of dependency have

been explored through conceptions of ‘travelling theories’ from the first to the third world and of ‘travelling theorists’ who move in the opposite direction.<sup>1</sup> Let me therefore venture to say that, allowing full play to the working out of power across unequal contexts, I nonetheless find many of the ideas that seem to undergird discussions on dependency theory, indigenous theory or Southern theory, to be fundamentally flawed. Certainly the following interrelated assumptions are misleading if not false: firstly, that a given theory is necessarily most true at its point of origin; secondly, that there is a problem when a theory or a concept is mobile (after all isn’t that the very definition of a theory or a concept, namely that they enjoy some degree of generalisability in order to qualify in the first place?); and, thirdly, that when theories are to be found in unequally structured terrain they must simply and only be alien impositions if not handmaidens of dominance. As the rest of my presentation hopes to suggest if not demonstrate, we need to think more about intersecting conceptual histories that work simultaneously as much as sequentially; and where we do not assume that ‘western’ theories are only true in their ‘western locations’ and have to be somehow adapted at some later point to a non-western context, where they always suffer a lack of fit. I am interested rather in what happens when a given theory or conceptual vocabulary is put to use in a particular context, without valorising origin over destination. There has been far too much obsession, for instance, with the Westernness of theory as though this fact alone made it suspect, rather than paying attention to the entangled contexts and complex relations that in fact characterise all theoretical endeavours. Concepts may well have multiple contexts of origin, and complex careers of use and transformation. Especially given power laden relationships between places and peoples, it is the capacity of concepts to provide not just



meaning and but also insight that should be our focus, rather than their ostensible purity in relation to a singular original source. This seems more useful for the periods of explicit theoretical production and consumption in relation to ‘women’ and feminism, namely the last two centuries in particular, intersected as they have been by colonial, postcolonial, neo-liberal and various other globalisations.

Within the broad field defined by the production of knowledge and emancipatory vocabularies for and about ‘women’, I will focus on the kinds of epistemes – that is to say, the broad discursive grids – that have played a structuring role in the history of the women’s question in India since the nineteenth century. As is well known, the notion of an episteme was popularised by Michel Foucault in his early work, notably in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. I shall be only rather loosely drawing on his own arguments.<sup>2</sup> For my purposes here, I wish to emphasize that an episteme is not just an idea, much less a position or perspective; it is also more than just a ‘frame’ for thinking and debate. In their introduction to what became a classic text of colonial history, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have put it thus: ‘a feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender differences as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations.’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 2-3, emphasis original). Or as the historian of modern China Tani Barlow has phrased it, ‘the subjects of gendered histories are themselves embedded in the history of thinking’. (Barlow 2004: 5) At the same time, I hope to show that the question of how exactly a feminist history of women is to set about its task turns out to be more complex than these very instructive formulations seem to allow

for. After all, even the most empirically oriented among us would not make a pitch for an unmediated mode of access to a given time and the social relations that constitute it. We can only access the past, or indeed the present, through the range of sources and representations of that moment that are available to us. On the other hand, I do not see this exercise as belittling the emancipatory project of the struggles of women and feminism, by setting up epistemes as the external constraints that fettered them. Rather my concern is with the very languages and terms – at once enabling and limiting – within which creative change was articulated and worlds were challenged and subsequently recovered.

To put it differently, I am trying to bring into focus a problem that is often lost sight of – namely the recursive and multi-layered quality of our very access to questions such as ‘women’ and their rights. This problem takes on a very special form when it comes to understanding the past, given that historians and theorists *must locate their interpretations of the past in the present* in order to render their accounts intelligible and meaningful to contemporary readers. It is these cumulative grids of intelligibility that I find particularly fascinating, especially when, in spite of major differences and disagreements, they nonetheless remain relatively stable over a certain period, after which changes and sometimes shifts are discernable. Since ‘women’ constitute a subject prone to marginalization if not invisibilisation in mainstream historiography and theory, it is all the more instructive to reflect on the modes whereby they become legible in/to a feminist analysis. Though my inquiry is directly shaped by the Indian case, I will be raising questions that could be of relevance for broader comparative analyses, whether within the so-called South (the erstwhile third world) or the global ‘North’ or ‘West’.



Here is the broad outline of what I wish to reflect on: In my view, there have been three main epistemes or grids of intelligibility in the history of 'women' and 'feminism' in India – the colonial, the national, and the post-national. The colonial episteme is by far the longest in temporal terms – its first rudiments are discernible in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and come to fullness in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and it begins to fracture during the 1930s and 1940s, in the years preceding independence and the ratification of the Republic and its Constitution in 1950. But for all its longevity, the colonial refuses to fade away – not only is it still very much with us, it has even found new life in numerous post-colonial analyses as I will try to attest. My second episteme is the national episteme, which came to be constructed by a founding generation of nationalists from the 1940s into the 1960s and is subjected to critique by the 1970s and 80s. The third episteme – which I have called the post-national – has been gathering force since the 1990s and is the one we are uneasily inhabiting at present. To clarify, I must emphasise that even though I am granting them sequential space across time, I do not mean to imply that each episteme simply succeeds and supplants the previous one. Rather, the most powerful of them all – the colonial episteme – continues into the present, and has received the most extensive treatment and corroboration. And the most recent of them is – precisely for this very reason – the most fragile and poorly articulated, so much so that even its name, 'postnational', invites considerable contestation.

Before I proceed, an important caveat: Since my discussion opens with the period of colonial modernity It might seem to beg questions about pre-modern and pre-colonial times and places and the kinds of epistemes that may have existed then. Clearly, for people interested in Indian thought and

philosophy, my beginning comes far too late. To clarify, it is not my claim that theories and concepts only begin to be organised into larger stable epistemes in the colonial period. There is now a growing body of work on histories of thought that have opened up pre-modern eras to analysis in many parts of the world. This undoubtedly includes ideas relating to women, though to a far lesser degree, and though it remains unclear whether one can usefully speak of theories relating to feminism as a political agenda and world view prior to modernity. At this stage in my own thinking I would not wish to foreclose on the question of pre-modern patterns of thought and their conceptual forms, although it remains beyond the scope of my explorations here.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE COLONIAL EPISTEME

India was subjected to colonization efforts by different European powers from the time of the Portuguese invasion and Vasco da Gama's first visit to the Western sea coast in 1494, but the most significant and far-reaching was the subsequent period of colonization under the British from the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century till independence was achieved in 1947. During this long period large parts of the sub-continent came under direct British rule, and were administered under three Presidencies – Bengal in the east, Bombay in the West, and Madras in the South. The colonial experience of the Bengal Presidency have been the most extensively studied, and this includes the women's question as well, though there is now a considerable literature spanning the entire subcontinent. From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europe and its colonies witnessed the emergence of a powerful new vocabulary that configured the economic, the social, and the political as distinct realms open to deliberate processes of change and control within the larger



rubrics of colonialism and capitalism. I would argue that while these three terms were circulating widely and were therefore shared across vast continents, their specific meanings and deployments were different, and they therefore produced significantly different consequences in particular regions. Moreover, these meanings also came to be gendered in interesting ways, so that the manner in which ‘women’ came to acquire new ‘substantiation’ becomes particularly noteworthy.

The first campaigns, public debates and fierce controversies on women and their status, initiated by men (Indian, British, missionary, and so on) stretched across the 19<sup>th</sup> century and set in motion a new vocabulary under colonial rule which, therefore, preceded the establishment of western style universities and their disciplinary structures in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The naming of this period as the era of ‘social reform’ – and the appropriateness of this name – are among the most taken for granted aspects of our modern history.* Interestingly, while it is well known that notions of social reform provided the British colonial state with the agenda for its civilising mission of reforming India’s backward or barbaric practices, it is not widely appreciated that the language of social reform took root at the time, often with even greater alacrity, in the so-called Princely states, such as Cochin, Travancore and Mysore. A neologism produced by stitching together the ‘social’ with ‘reform’, the idea of social reform was energised by women’s status as a profound problem requiring improvement. ‘Women’ were marked therefore by conceptions of lack, lowliness, backwardness and oppression, all of which could and should be changed. Notions of the ‘social’ thus turn out to be critical indices of intelligibility for women’s issues, and vice versa – a social issue became



quintessentially a women's issue. Needless to add that this crucial mutual implication has had long term repercussions and continues to cast its shadow on the present.

In other words, the very notion of a social issue acquired meaning through the first debates and controversies over such issues as girls' and women's education, the practice of *sati* or widow burning at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by demands for widow remarriage, raising the age of consent for marriage, combating female infanticide, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Colonial society was fiercely divided over all of these, even as there was considerable movement and fundamental, even profoundly positive, change by the turn of the century. Take, for instance, the extremely significant issue of women's education, which was opposed by many groups in the mid nineteenth century. But by the end of that same century, a certain vision of education became part of the world view of a new upwardly mobile middle class, making possible the emergence of a 'new woman' and a modern subjectivity, buttressed by profound transformations in notions of the family, caste and community, law and the state. (Sarkar and Sarkar, 2007). It is not accidental that the two groups who in pre-colonial *pathshalas* had been most excluded from education, namely the untouchable castes and girls, were the ones whose entry into schooling became the site for the most long lasting deployment of vocabularies of social reform and social change. To take an example of the use of the ideas of the social from the history of this very region of Kerala, J.Devika has argued about the 'inseparability' of the 'social' from the notion of the gendered individual, 'within which the duties, rights and capabilities of this Individual are defined, measured and defended'. (Devika 2007: 8)



However, my purpose here is not to provide an account of this history, but rather to emphasize the reiterative modes whereby a terminology came into being, and which was in turn itself substantiated through the interpretative grids supplied by scholars in our own time. If there were debates in the past, even fierce ones, this has been just as true of present efforts to make sense of the past, within the halls of academia. A number of historians – Lata Mani, Partha Chatterjee, Tanika Sarkar, Mrinalini Sinha, to name a few of those who have engaged with the history of gender and feminism in colonial Bengal – have identified critical ingredients of the colonial episteme, even though there have been deep differences among them. The key idea of the ‘social’ that I have already discussed, came to be variously supplemented by notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’. But my main point here is that these meanings were further developed *in contrast to* questions of the ‘political’. Simultaneously paired and contrasted, terms such as the ‘social’ and the ‘political’, or ‘society’ and the ‘state’ — were in turn upheld and carried forward by colonial knowledges, such as sociology/anthropology (especially of communities and castes), theories of religion and philosophy (including Orientalisms of various kinds), as well as political theories such as liberalism. Again, it is necessary to emphasize that these processes were well in place before the establishment of departments of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and the like.<sup>5</sup>

According to Lata Mani, for instance, the first debates on women were contained within what she has called a colonial discourse about India in the opening decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women, in her reading, were not in fact the subject of these debates at all, but rather the ground on which the debate on “India” came to be written. Through the long drawn

question of the status of women in ancient and colonial times, the very nature of Indian tradition, its authenticity through the notion of scripture came to be produced. (Mani 1989; 1998) The highly contested sphere of girls' education, beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century in places like Tirunelveli, Kottayam, and Calcutta, saw the complex deployment, not only of social reform, but probably the first explicit use of notions of 'rights'. By the end of that century, and not only in the region of colonial Bengal, social reform agendas were being increasingly taken over and recast by the rising politics of nationalism. According to Partha Chatterjee's important formulation, nationalist discourses were able to successfully resolve the women's question precisely because nationalism was a *cultural* discourse well before it was a political one. Women, then, became the bearers of Indian culture and tradition, but a recast, indeed modernized tradition. Even more significantly, women became the bearers of sovereignty for colonized men, in contrast to – and as compensation for – the public colonial world where men and their masculinity had been subjected by and lost to colonialism. The inner and the outer realms, the spiritual and material, the cultural and political, the home and the world – these, according to Chatterjee were the binaries of the reworked colonial episteme, with women as the vital fulcrum. (Chatterjee 1989; 1993) It should no longer surprise us, then, that by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most conflicted terms of the women's question for the first generation of pre-Independence feminists were, indeed, culture and modernity. The new woman for the nation in the making could not be modern like the western woman, or without culture like lower class/ caste women – she had to be schooled, indeed *educated* into the right kind of tradition for the future. The spheres of the home, of conjugal relations, of religious practice and domesticity



– these were the critical spheres of sovereignty for the colonized – since the colonial state had conquered the material economic public political spheres. Arguing on similar terrain but from a different vantage point, Tanika Sarkar asserted that the very sphere of the home within revivalist nationalist discourses was a deeply Hindu patriarchal construct, with infant marriage as its ideal. By the end of the century, public debates over conjugal violence and the age of consent, penetrating the innermost structures of the Hindu family, were not just the preserve of Hindu nationalism, but also, in her view, became the basis for articulations of a language of rights, thus marking the very first inchoate links between a social issue and a political one, society and the state. (Sarkar 2001; Sarkar and Sarkar 2007)

The subject of women thus came to occupy a place of tension between the social and political realms, with culture as a kind of limit or stopping point. This happened during the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the very years that saw the development of the first women's organisations and the growing force of nationalism. Given the special relationship between women and culture in curtailing the energies of social reform, with Hindu nationalism resignifying Indian womanhood as the bearer of tradition in the battle against colonialism and the West, it may be somewhat clearer to us now why feminism (whether named as such from the early twentieth century or simply as short hand for the battles conducted in the name of women) came to occupy such a conflicted position. With feminism on the side of modernity, and the normative woman (middle class Hindu upper caste, deeply familial) on the side of culture, we can now see how the national response to colonialism in India set in motion a set of objections to feminism in particular – as

alien and in conflict with Indian culture. (Niranjana 2007) And yet, there was nothing hard and fast about this set of tensions. As the historian Mrinalini Sinha has demonstrated, during the interwar years of the 1920s and 30s, changing historical circumstances and imperial realignments made possible a brief coming together of the social and political in the wake of the controversy of Katherine Mayo's diatribe *Mother India*. Women's organisations produced a new universal subject (thus heralding the arrival of liberalism and universal rights through women) cutting across religious communities and castes in their battle to raise the age of marriage of all Indian women from 12 to 14 years. (Sinha 2007)

If, then, the Indian subcontinent came to be understood through the working out of the colonial episteme on the subject of women in relation to the social and political, tradition and modernity, culture and the nation, what of other spaces? In her elaborate and finely argued book *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, Tani Barlow has drawn attention to the makings of what she has called colonial modernity in the history of China. She has explored the many 'preconditions' that went into the foundations of Chinese feminism, through the engagements of Chinese thinkers with international biosocial, evolutionary, and revolutionary thinking, especially during the 1920s and 30s. Interestingly, she has pointed to the role that certain eugenicist theories came to play in the early theorizing of Chinese 'vernacular sociology', which served to highlight the inadequacy of Chinese women in very specific ways, one which could be overcome by opposing family, clan and tradition through the freedom to love and choose a partner of their own. All of these were critical ingredients in the various progressive movements, including feminism, which gained both visibility and force at this time in the Chinese



context. Though this requires much more careful exploration than I can attempt here, the experience of colonialism in the Indian context gave rise to notions of social reform and cultural nationalism which led to conflicted relationships with feminism as modern and ‘western’, and resulted in the relative marginalization of those figures who proposed notions of a revolutionary self opposed to tradition, including notions such as choice and ‘free love’ in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India compared to China.<sup>6</sup> A comparative analysis of the place that ‘woman’ came to occupy in the thinking and writing of such figures as Gandhi and Mao would therefore be extremely interesting for yielding insights into their respective colonial/national epistemic spaces, given the ways in which civilisational traditions were invoked in both, including the special identification of women’s oppression with spheres of the family, child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Equally provocative for further exploration would be a comparison of the Indian 19<sup>th</sup> century with its European counterpart. Clearly ‘social reform’ was hardly confined to the colonies. According to Denise Riley, it is precisely an unprecedented conception of the ‘social’ in early nineteenth century Britain, a ‘new topography’ which did not have a conscious past, becoming a ‘groundswell in the Western world,’ that was able to imbue premodern understandings of woman and her ‘Nature’ with a new content: “The ‘social’ does not merely admit women into it...it is as if ‘women’ become established as a new kind of sociological collectivity’. (Riley 1988: 50). Riley is more concerned to show how this new construction enables what was not possible before, namely a disengagement from women as embodiments of ‘nature’. However, what she fails to appreciate, it seems to me, is that such undoubtedly new notions of women as social (along with

other groups) did not go uncontested, but went hand in hand with equally powerful discourses of biology, medicine, psychology and psychiatry, among others, which sought to realign “woman” with biology and so with nature, with fundamental consequences for the future of feminism in Europe and the western world more broadly.<sup>8</sup> Bourgeois womanhood was produced as much through the elaborate apparatus that gave the world women’s physical frailty, diminished brain size, and the Freudian ‘anatomy is destiny’ – all of which fed into her incapacity for any political role as citizen, and which had to be fought over by generations of feminists struggling for women’s political rights. (As has been observed over and over again, women in countries like India did not have a comparable struggle over political rights such as the franchise, which took on a distinctively different form (Sinha 1999, Forbes 2002, John 2008a) and was bequeathed as a universal right to all citizens with the end of colonial rule.) The discourses of biology and nature in relation to questions of the social in western contexts have, in my view, been as profound as those of the cultural and social in colonial India, and as long lasting. It is not for nothing that what is most remembered in Simone de Beauvoir’s vast text *The Second Sex* (2011) is her slogan “one is not born but becomes a woman”, a statement meant precisely to counter the massive institutional and discursive deployment whereby the biological facticity of femaleness was uniquely women’s burden. How frequently has it been imperative among western feminists to break the association between women and nature, subsequently articulated in the English speaking world as the sex-gender distinction, or again in the frequent opposition between nature and culture, in order to prove that the structures of oppression are fully social and cultural and therefore transformable? Biology has thus been central to the founding episteme of western feminism, whose



universalizing claims have yet to be placed in the right perspective.

I would contend that this has been somewhat different in situations like India – biology fed into much more powerful dominant discourses on culture, tradition and their relation to concepts of the ‘social’.<sup>9</sup> So much so that it is binaries such as tradition/modernity or social/political that have been formative, creating a sense of conflict between culture and politics, and an ambivalence towards modernity. For some, modernity was coterminous with emancipation and women’s rights, while culture and feminism could not be readily aligned and have been frequently pitted against each other, right up to the present.

Be that as it may, by the 1930s and certainly by the 40s, the prominent strands of “social feminism” (Forbes 1996) and “cultural nationalism” were being disturbed by other movements and concerns. For example, political nationalism side-lined women’s issues, but on the other hand, communist and socialist-inspired women (and men) reached out to working women and (to a lesser extent) to rural women, and made economic rights central for the first time.<sup>10</sup>

The National Episteme and its Internal Critique

Let me now move on to the next episteme, that I have called the national episteme, one which was by no means unique to India, but was in all likelihood widely shared by many decolonizing nations of the erstwhile Third World. (See Jayawardene 1986; also John 2007) The national episteme was made possible by the resolution of the nationalist movement through the creation of the Indian nation state. After almost two centuries of colonial rule, the Indian nation needed to imagine itself anew, and this was achieved through



the worldview of development. Development offered a view of the future and a break from the colonial past. Under the leadership of Nehru, alternate models for the future of the nation – whether Gandhian, communist or right-wing were successfully contained if not violently suppressed. With a mix of socialist and capitalist paths, under the broad umbrella of the Third World and the movement of Non-alignment, the Indian version of the ideology of development brought together state, nation and the economy in a potent combination. (Deshpande 1993) Economic nationalism — not cultural nationalism — was now the central organizing principle, tradition was to be contained through modernization, and formal equality to all was enshrined within the new Constitution. Pre-independence women's movements effectively handed over the task of nation-building and the progress of India's women to the State. Other voices were marginalised.

This conception was to remain more or less in place for the first two decades of the 1950s and 60s. By the end of the 60s and certainly in the early years of the 70s, however, this model of nation-state development suffered its first cracks and came to crisis with the imposition of a state of political Emergency 1975-77 under the premiership of Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Nehru. Women's studies and a newly forged women's movement were born in this moment of political and economic turmoil and unrest. (See Gandhi and Shah 1992; John 2004, 2008b) In my view, women's studies and a fresh phase of the women's movement took the predominant form of an internal critique of this national episteme, composed of state-led economic development and liberal equality. By this I mean that the critiques of the 1970s were articulated more or less within the parameters of the nation-state – it was to the nation-



state that the first activists and scholars of this generation addressed their anger and shock at the signs of widespread failure. They demanded new knowledges from the perspectives of women whom the state had failed. This critique was made up of two broad strands: There were the critiques of development and poverty, with existing evidence pointing to a worsening of the status of women in the very years devoted to state-led planning and progress (thus giving pride of place to development economics within the social sciences); And secondly, there were critiques of the law and of society from the perspective of violence against women, including by representatives of the state such as the police (thus opening up new fields such as the study of violence that had found little place in the social sciences hitherto).

In order to demonstrate the relative novelty of the ingredients of the national episteme for feminism, let me take the example of poverty. After all, the poverty of India was hardly a new question, and had exercised the minds and energies of nationalists from at least the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in their attacks on the British and their impoverishment of India. As Satish Deshpande has put it, a powerful imaginary of India as an 'enslaved economy' animated movements such as the *swadeshi* movement, the 'drain theory' of colonialism, and so on. (Deshpande *ibid.*) But, as I argued above, this was not how 'women' were being articulated, given the modes in which the social and cultural became the primary horizons of meaning and contestation. It is only with the arrival of development discourse and practice, at once national and international, that hitherto marginal battles over women as workers and not just housewives and mothers, and the vast spaces of rural India could come to the fore. (John 1996; John 2012) To take the example of an early essay reviewing the birth of women's studies

in India in the 1970s, Vina Mazumdar and Kumud Sharma looked back at the history of social reform, the political mobilisations of the national movement and the establishment of Constitutional guarantees of equality to question the large scale neglect of women's issues by the social sciences in the years following independence. They were at their sharpest in criticising ongoing scholarship that placed the onus of women's low status on the ongoing force of 'tradition' and 'culture'. Instead, they drew attention to and called for more work on women's participation in agriculture, the urban informal sector, women's declining political representation, the effects of contemporary socialisation processes, the overall trends of modernisation, in their words, 'the magnitude and complexity of women and development'. (Mazumdar and Sharma 1979; John 1996b).

Therefore, whereas the colonial episteme had been primarily organized around the 'social' in relations of contestation to concepts of tradition and culture, the national episteme was constituted through a critique of modernity and development – a modernity whose claims to equality had rendered women's marginalization invisible. Colonial and post-colonial laws were critiqued for their unsuspected biases; the development process was questioned for its exclusions, especially of poor women; and modern middle class society was attacked for encouraging such phenomena as the murder of young brides by their in-laws for more dowry. During the 1980s, when everyone was shocked by a case of sati that hit the headlines in the western state of Rajasthan, feminists were able to demonstrate that this was no vestige from the past but a fully modern crime. (Sangari 1988) In all these critiques, feminists demanded that the state reform its laws, bring in a more genuinely socialist order or least fulfill its promises for people's welfare.



In other words, the oppositional discourses of the women's movement nonetheless worked (with few exceptions) within the horizon provided by the nation state, its policies and laws. As I have discussed elsewhere, both women's studies and women's organisations were led predominantly by middle class upper caste women, who saw themselves as playing a representative role – standing for the large mass of women, speaking in their name and on their behalf, confident of their ability to do so. (John 1996a) When they were attacked for being westernized feminists (as their colonial-era predecessors had been as well), they dismissed these claims as a patriarchal ploy, pointed to their understanding of local issues, and looked to the state for change. (See Chaudhuri 2000)

#### ENTER THE 'POST-NATIONAL'

But by the close of the 1980s and certainly by the onset of the 1990s, feminists were to discover the ground moving beneath their feet again, forcing them onto unfamiliar terrain. A series of critical events have been disorienting and disturbing feminist perspectives – events from within the nation and beyond. Globalisation is the most familiar term that has been used to designate the shift in paradigm in countries like India, from the thinking and planning led by economic nationalism described above, towards the belief in greater global integration through less restricted markets, a reduced economic role of the state and so on. However, for reasons that I hope will become clearer as I go along, I wish to describe the new episteme that took shape from the 1990s with the designation "post-national".

But before I venture further, let me briefly address the notion of the 'post-colonial', since many may have indeed wondered

why this term finds no mention whatsoever in my epistemic catalogue. Conceptions of the post-colonial as they emerged in the 1980s across the globe, have been as potent as they have been ambiguous. In terms of its usages, the post-colonial intellectual has condensed into the position occupied by those of Third World origin now residing in the geographical West (See Dhareshwar et al 1989; Dirlik 1994). When references are made to post-colonial theory, these in turn indicate an orientation that draws from a body of work identified as postmodern or poststructuralist (Said's *Orientalism* is often cited here; see also Appiah 1991). When employed in the formulation postcolonial world, the term stretches to encompass the globe as a whole, so much so that the materiality of different geographical locations understood both spatially and temporally, dwindles into insignificance.

The most beneficial aspect of the concept of the post-colonial, in my view, has been as a wedge that forced a reopening of the question of colonialism in the life of nations that had achieved formal independence, leading to multiple recognitions of the ongoing processes of Western domination in the present. However, it is not accidental that it achieved its fullest potential in western academic contexts, and that it frequently occluded significant aspects of the problems besetting contemporary postcolonies themselves. I tend therefore to see the postcolonial as a rearticulation of the colonial episteme in the present (including the kind of work I mentioned in my discussions of that episteme), a vital mode of thinking that continues to provide insights in the fractured post-national present that I will now turn my attention to.

By post-national I mean a situation where the nation is no longer the obvious or only horizon or frame of reference for



our questions and critiques. As a collective statement introducing the postnational condition phrased it “the post-national signals an intellectual condition, a position of critique and a new horizon of intelligibility beyond that constituted by the nation state in its heyday. This does not necessarily mean that ‘the era of the nation state is over’ but it does mean that the emancipatory potential once embodied in the nation state is not all that evident.” (de Alwis et al, 2009: 35) No single event or process has brought this situation into being, indeed, the diverse kinds of pressures and developments that have changed the place of the nation in current discourses in India, and for feminists in particular, cannot be overemphasized. Both the significance of the *internal* composition of the nation and its people (questions that the national episteme and the development it promised were supposed to have solved), and that of “our” relationships to the worlds beyond our borders have fundamentally altered the frames within which questions of feminism and women’s rights are functioning today. The conception of the post-national being deployed here therefore should not be confused with “the sense in which corporations and the self-defined ‘global civil society’ conceive of spaces above and beyond the nation.” (Menon 2009: 70)

The dislodging of the nation as the horizon which had been forged in the wake of colonialism is therefore not being simply supplanted by a new global or cosmopolitan episteme as dominant western discourses would have us believe. If anything, fractures within the nation have made their presence felt even before the growing onslaught of globalisation could have its effects. Let me list them quickly: Questions of caste and communalism (religious community-based affiliation and conflict) have become newly visible as systems of hierarchy and identity within contemporary society. Muslim women’s

relationship to the “nation” has turned into a highly conflicted issue. Dalit feminists — representing caste divisions and discrimination — have questioned mainstream feminism in India for its exclusions and biases. The earlier confidence in our secularism has been fundamentally shaken. The rise of Hindu right wing forces in particular, with a powerful programme of making India “Hindu” has raised further questions about the nature of nationalism itself.

This is also why the term post-national is meant to resist the over easy narrative of a shift from the ‘national’ phase of India’s post independence history and epistemic self-understanding to a globalising one. One of the problems with the hegemony thus accorded to globalisation is that it crowds out alternate, context-sensitive, accounts of our present.<sup>11</sup>

In any event, the very nature and force of neo-liberal globalisation as such has by no means lent itself to easy description. Feminist responses have been diverse, beginning with its more observable economic aspects. Without going into fuller detail, there has been no consensus over the effects of this new phase of globalisation on the lives of women in comparison to the era of development (see the views of Ghosh 2009, Hensman 2004, Omvedt and Gala 1994, Jhabvala and Subramanya 2004, Shiva 1998, discussed in John 2009). Just a quick look makes it amply evident what divergent pictures are being painted, even though the subject of their analyses is only one dimension of globalisation — and the best known one, at that — namely, its economic aspect. And this diversity exists in spite of the fact that these are positions and arguments held by feminists committed to social justice, seasoned members of the women’s movement — by no means the views of the neo-liberal or fundamentalist right wing. In the context



of my concerns with the post-national, I wish to emphasize what these diverse perspectives have in common. In spite of being incommensurable on many counts, they share one important feature – they serve to destabilise the globalisation narrative that is otherwise routinely seen as being beyond question.

Furthermore, as I have already emphasized, any grid for understanding the present must make room for the (re)emergence of communalism, the rise of caste, and, more recently, of non-normative sexualities. Each of these has disturbed the grounds of the women's movement in fundamental ways, and need to be looked at in their own right, whatever their ramifications with global processes. There is no way, for instance, that the wave of backward caste politics of the 1980s, culminating in the violent backlash of upper caste campaigns opposing caste based quotas in 1990 (popularly called the anti-Mandal agitations), can be laid at the door of globalisation. If anything, links would have to be drawn in the opposite direction, as upper caste elites kicked away the welfare State — as the ladder they no longer needed — with greater ferocity after the move to implement reservations in government services and higher education. Interestingly, it was only in the 1990s that feminists developed caste-based critiques of gender, rediscovered the forgotten legacies of anti-caste leaders from the colonial period such as Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, and Babasaheb Ambedkar. (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998; Rege 2006; Chakravarti 2004) And to this day, Dalit feminists are not just raising demands for a separate political space, but pointing to an ongoing blindness in mainstream approaches to caste. Issues of sexuality are equally far-reaching and contentious. (John and Nair 1998, Menon 2007, Kotiswaran 2011) Unfortunately, it has been possible for many



women's activists and organisations to evade the newer languages and challenges of sexuality movements – such as the gay and lesbian movement or struggles over sex work – precisely by seeing them as off-shoots of globalisation. Thus, heavily financed AIDS awareness campaigns among sex workers have been targeted or viewed with considerable unease, as have been non-government organisations and collectives mobilising on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, though there are some welcome signs of change. Sexuality campaigns – against the criminalisation of same sex relations, or in favour of sex workers rights – not to speak of problems of normative sexuality, have now begun to find some space for debate or recognition, whether among major women's organisations or in women's studies.

This account of the criss-crossing issues and concerns that are gathering force in a mode that I believe is best described as post-national, would be incomplete without acknowledging the achievements and problems besetting feminism itself. Feminism now has a marginal presence in the syllabi of different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, while women's studies centres are proliferating across the country under the fiat of the University Grants Commission. Institutionalisation has congealed around the term "gender," as state, NGOs (both local and international) and women's organizations take on various tasks in its name. This means that a certain presence – if not power, however contradictory – attaches to the subject "women".

Along with the greater institutional visibility of feminism today, there are accounts and acknowledgements of the complex experiences of a younger generation, such as metropolitan students (who spearheaded the women's movement in the



1970s and 80s) that at times also appear to be disavowing feminism. A teacher in a Mumbai college recently described her disappointment, when, barring a few exceptions, most women students did not relate positively to issues concerning the women's movement and feminist theorizing. For some — English-speaking, upwardly mobile and with strong professional ambitions of their own — feminism was rejected because it seemed to block or mock their desires; for others, particularly lower middle class students, unsure of any future outside of marriage, feminism appeared alienating, unable to touch their destinies. (Phadke, n.d.)

#### Concluding Remarks

Drawing these strands together clearly calls for a mode of grasping the present time, in all its opacity and difficulty, in ways that do not shut out the forces at work both within and beyond the boundaries of 'India'. That is why I have been suggesting that – at least in India — we are better served using the notion of the “post-national” as a marker of the present time and as my third episteme. In our context at least I am favouring it over other contenders, whether it be the 'global' or the 'post-colonial'. The post-national acknowledges that the nation no longer occupies the sovereign position or defines the horizon of intelligibility as it once did, without ceding the horizon of intelligibility to global or western processes in some unilateral fashion.

The overall arguments that I have attempted to explore with you here are not ones of singularity or uniqueness, as though the three epistememes of the colonial, the national and the post-national that I have so cursorily outlined are only true for India. There is a great more that needs to be said on each of them, and numerous doubts if not objections could be raised. Nor do I wish to claim that they should be given universal validity.

Rather I am making an appeal from the space-time location of the women's movement and feminism in India, one of so many in the world, that these epistemes are good to think with and even better for engaging in productive conversations, whether within our nation or beyond.



## NOTES

1. I take these terms from the title of a special issue of the journal *Inscriptions* 'Traveling theories, Traveling theorists' no. 5, 1989 (University of California at Santa Cruz), editors Vivek Dhareshwar and James Clifford.
2. In a much later interview, at a time when his own thinking had taken him away from the more structuralist underpinnings of an episteme in favour of what he called a genealogical method, Foucault had this to say about epistemes: An episteme is 'not a sort of *grand underlying theory*, it is a space of *dispersion*, it is an *open and doubtless infinitely describable field of relationships*.' (in Burchell et al 1991: 55). He goes on to point out that several epistemes could even coexist, that they do not simply supplant each other, but point rather to the significance of discontinuities in the history of thought. Unfortunately, for my purposes here, much of his thinking was bound by existing disciplinary formations, such as medicine, the economy, the study of populations and such like. It is telling that he did not venture into the field of sociology for instance and only very indirectly into questions of gender, even though sexuality absorbed so much of his energies. Many critics have further emphasized his limited Eurocentric field of operation, so much so that colonialism never entered his frame of reference. Nonetheless he has been extremely fruitfully drawn upon by numerous postcolonial scholars.
3. This question is equally pertinent and complex within western and non-western contexts. Even in the more well researched contexts of Europe, the question as to what meanings can be given to a collectivity 'women' prior to modernity has been subjected to considerable debate. According to Denise Riley it is necessary to distinguish between the many conceptions of women's inferiority and imperfection (say in Aristotle or in Christian thought and subsequently), the earliest identifiably feminist debates of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in countries like

France, and the subsequent eighteenth and nineteenth century productions of 'women' as a new social category which made possible a new politics in their name. (Riley 1988). See also the work of Gerda Lerner, for instance, who attempted to unearth patriarchal structures as far back as 3000 BCE in the regions of Mesopotamia and compare this with her subsequent efforts to delineate the first signs of feminist consciousness in early modern Europe.. (Lerner 1986, 1996)

4. Highlighting the co-construction of women and the social by no means implies that this was a unique or singular process. Questions of caste and religious community, indeed, were also subjected to social reform in both parallel and intertwining ways, which are urgently in need for further examination. For our purposes here it is therefore all the more telling that it is through subsequent historical explorations by contemporary historians that the relationship of women to social reform came to dominate the social reform narrative, at some cost to the caste, class and community dimensions of understanding and interpreting this very period.
5. See Sundar, Uberoi and Deshpande 2007 for biographical accounts of early anthropologists and sociologists in India.
6. It was among a small number of individuals and leaders – of the anti-caste movements in the South and among heterodox communist inspired intellectuals — whose nationalism was made suspect — that “radical” notions of women’s sexuality and choice found its adherents.
7. (For further discussions of inter-Asia comparisons see John (ed.) 2007.)
8. The other major site where biological discourses and practices were to have an unprecedented constructive if not inventive role in this period is that of race.
9. This is not to assert that ideas of ‘nature’ or the unnatural played no significant roles in India during the colonial period. There are at least two sites where ideas of nature



were explicitly and prominently deployed, and by the British themselves. The first was in the Indian Penal Code Section 377 which criminalized certain sexual acts as being ‘against the order of nature’. The second can be found in the anthropological, missionary and social reform debates around matriliney in Kerala – where the matrilineal family came to be stigmatized as ‘unnatural’, leading to ideas of the natural family as patrilineal and patrilocal. However, such conceptions of nature remained subordinate and localized compared to the pan subcontinental reach and sway of the vocabulary of the social, political and cultural that I have been discussing.

10. It is during the late 1930s and early 40s that the influence of socialism and political economy become more visible within women’s organisations. A remarkable instance of this is the Report on *Women’s Role in a Planned Economy* produced under the aegis of Nehru as one of twenty nine sub-committees of the National Planning Committee, set up in 1938. For a discussion of this report see Maitreyee Chaudhuri 1995.
11. This section draws substantially from my discussion in John 2009.

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