

# Political and Cultural Negotiations with Feminism in India: A Perspective

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## I Doing Theory Differently: Is There a Theory-Praxis Schism in our Feminism(s)?

A persistent theme animating contemporary interventions in cultural studies, mounted on a transnational framework, has been the complicated relationship between theory and praxis. On that theme, I venture the proposition that to think of intellectual work as a site of bitter and dissonant contestation between theory and praxis is perhaps to fall prey to a false notion of scarcity, as if there were only so much ground that could tether intellectual work.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri grapples with this fraught battle for terrain in her study of the women's movement in India. At the very outset of her introduction to *Feminism in India* (2005), she flags a perceived "sparseness of theoretical writing," and this concern occupies centre stage in her analysis of what she calls the "academic-activist dichotomy," alternatively understood as the widely apprehended schism between theory and praxis.<sup>1</sup> She connects this supposed paucity of theorization to two important circumstances. The first is the unequal organization of academic labour in the international arena, by virtue of which the Western academe becomes the arbiter and validator of knowledge claims, fostering and institutionalizing theoretical fluency in rarefied spaces that remain insulated from the tangible realities of the Global South. And the second, a concern that is particularly relevant in transnational conversations, is an exasperation or impatience with theory in a country like India, where the immediate demand for the alleviation of people's quotidian problems surmounts all else.

Chaudhuri's argument reminds one of a critical and poignant question once posed by Stuart Hall: "Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?"<sup>2</sup> By following Hall's argument further, one can ascertain that much of the dichotomization between theory and praxis in contemporary discourse arises from the fact that theory's consummate institution-

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<sup>1</sup> Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," in *Feminism in India*, edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 106.

alization has led to a “moment of extraordinarily profound danger” in its history, taking it away from its undeniable roots in social movements and people’s lived realities.<sup>3</sup> Such a distancing results in the ossification of theory into an inert mode of thinking that is far removed from activism or the engaged work of the organic intellectual.

A possible response to these concerns may be that there is a need to reimagine the origins and purposes of theory – in this case, feminist theory. In Chaudhuri’s words, this involves seeing that it is “impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas.”<sup>4</sup> A great deal of feminist work or intellectual work towards social justice and emancipation in India is embedded in a “history of doing” that has not always found legibility and legitimacy in the discourse of Western academic feminism.<sup>5</sup> But what if the history of doing is a history of thinking and theorizing in itself?

From the limited purview of my personal experience, I can assert that the feminist politics that Indian students cultivate and sustain on public university campuses is built on a rigorous and decidedly academic engagement with theory, and this project of making theory accessible and actionable to individuals from across the socio-economic spectrum (in a country where theory is so often seen as superfluous and indulgent) is indeed one of the key areas that demand the concentration of intellectual labour. There is a great measure of “doing” involved in the proliferation of feminist theory, in the work of infusing that theory with an orientation towards action, and in rescuing it from the fate of stultification; and this is the crucial task that students’ organizations and collectives undertake on campus. For one such student collective’s weekly meetings, we would routinely discuss or present on various feminist theoretical debates, and our agendas and charters for action would often emerge from such discussions and inform the trajectory of future events organized by the collective. To my mind, these meetings remain some of the most memorable sites of coalescence between theory and praxis engendered by the space of the public university, testifying to the fabricated nature of any binaries between these two domains.

But this repurposing of feminist theory is necessarily complicated because, as Chaudhuri reminds us, as feminists in the Global South, we are expected to first familiarize ourselves with radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist, and feminist debates in the West: a body of scholarship that is projected as an indispensable gateway into our acquaintance with these issues. The kind of primacy afforded to such a mode of entry has given way to “a disjunction between theoretical and empirical work as well as a failure to read theory when presented in a form and style different from accepted Western academic protocol.”<sup>6</sup>

Chaudhuri’s resonant arguments remind one of Patricia Hill Collins’s articulations along similar lines in “Towards an Afro-Centric Feminist Epistemology”

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>4</sup> Chaudhuri, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 13.

(2003). In this text, she advocates for a different epistemology whose methods of validating claims to truth are necessarily distinct from those established by the Western academic edifice. She writes:

Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge validation, white male interests pervade the thematic content of traditional scholarship. As a result, Black women's experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in, or excluded from, traditional academic discourse. [...] The suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production has led African-American women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behaviour as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

This proposes a kind of activism and intellectual work that is rooted in a theory of its own making: one whose knowledge claims defy the political and epistemological criteria of the Western context. What emerges is a theory of difference that refers not only to content, but also – and more fundamentally – to form and movement. Such an epistemology enriches our understanding of how historically marginalized groups create knowledges that foster resistance and Collins's ideas seem to be in alignment with what is indicated in Chaudhuri's text: We do theory differently here.

## II Complicated Solidarities: Men within the Feminist Movement

However, this assertion of difference in turn often results in an over-signification of the "Westernness" of feminism, which leads to a search for indigenous roots that is worth problematizing. Chaudhuri rightly points at the potential dangers in such a quest for epistemological indigeneity in a diverse society and polity such as India's, especially at a time when majoritarianism wields immense power and routinely perpetrates the erasure of minorities and their modes of articulation or representation in the body politic. In light of an increasingly widespread radicalization of Hindu society in India – a process that borrows the resources of the term "decolonial" quite often to serve its own disingenuous ends – one becomes sceptical and indeed wary of a rejection of the "Western," because of the inevitable consequences of such an eschewal in a troubled, deeply unequal, and fractured postcolonial society. Certainly, the notion that feminism is a Western imposition cannot be the only thing that haunts the women's rights movement in India. There is also the equally, if not

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia H. Collins, "Towards an Afro-Centric Feminist Epistemology," in *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief*, edited by Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2003), 47–48.

more, concerning fact that feminism, like other progressive movements, has come to be controlled by upper-caste elites in India's heavily hierarchized caste society. Activists and intellectual workers from the historically marginalized Dalit Bahujan Adivasi caste groups have drawn attention to the many ways in which feminism is Brahmanical in India or has at the very least been co-opted by Brahmanical forces offering piecemeal rewards to upper-caste Hindu women at the cost of breaking the back of any authentic intersectional sisterhood. These contestations and fissures inevitably rise in a society built on caste, where liberal feminism, offering the illusion of choice, unites with existing hegemonies and social formations to run aground any true emancipatory possibilities for women battling structures of oppression beyond, though trafficking with, patriarchy.

Liberal feminism brings us to the question of selfhood and/or individuality, often deployed and weaponized to enact strategies of exclusion. Just as in the West, White feminists may profess a directly adversarial relationship with White men, upper-caste Hindu women in India too often establish distance from the men of their community – a move that enables us to forge our selfhood solely on the axis of gender, free of the accountability that belonging to an oppressor caste would entail. But such negotiations are not black-and-white when women from historically oppressed communities engage in feminist politics: Dalit Bahujan Adivasi or Muslim women in India, like Black women in the US, might not wish to politically distance themselves from the men of their community, who are also systemically disadvantaged.

A quick example from popular culture that illustrates this fundamental difference on the question of women's solidarity with men, is the discernible contrast between White women's feminist punk music and Black women's hip hop in the US. The former, through songs such as Bikini Kill's "White Boy" (1992) and The Julie Ruin's "Mr. So and So" (2016),<sup>8</sup> adopts an avowedly confrontational approach towards men and masculinity. Meanwhile, the latter often sends an affirmative message to Black men in its classics, while reserving the confrontational tones for the society in which they are frequently put down, clearly positioning Black women as Black men's allies. In the poignant classic track called "The Sweetest Thing" (1992), as a prime example for this, Lauryn Hill extols her "sweet prince of the ghetto" for his "precious, precious, precious, precious dark skin tone."<sup>9</sup>

This difference also routinely manifests itself in the way women from marginalized communities mobilize for and participate in political protest. For instance, during the countrywide demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 and 2020 – now emblemized by the Shaheen Bagh sit-in that led to Muslim women embracing that model of protest across the nation – a strain of analysis emerged that painted women (understood as a monolithic or unified category,

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<sup>8</sup> See Bikini Kill, "White Boy," recorded October 1992, track 1 on *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah* (Kill Rock Stars Records, 1993), and The Julie Ruin, "Mr. So and So," n.d., track 7 on *Hit Reset* (Hardly Art Cargo Records, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Lauryn Hill (featuring the Refugee Camp All-Stars), "Sweetest Thing," n.d., track 3 of *Love Jones: The Music* (Sony Records, 1997).

shorn of the markers of religious identity) as the torchbearers of resistance. Such an approach perceived their protest as a form of mobilization against not just that immediate piece of legislation, but also, on a larger scale, against multiple religious patriarchies. Their protest came to be seen as a feminist resurgence against the masculinist strategies of control and authoritarianism, eliding the particularities of identity in the process and ignoring the reality of Hindu women's participation in the oppression of Muslim women. What this analysis failed to consider or highlight, as was pointed out by many activists and commentators at the time, is that the religious identity of Muslims in particular was at stake and under attack, and that Muslims of all genders were united in their opposition against the regime. By drawing a false equivalence between patriarchy within Muslim communities in India and the Brahmanical patriarchy powered and harnessed by the Indian state, this approach to women's rights activism ran the risk of obscuring and delegitimizing the specific struggles of Muslim women in India – struggles that go above and beyond the battles Hindu women fight. Not to mention that this equivalence also threatened to villainize Muslim men, who are equally vulnerable in a Hindu majoritarian nation state. The construction of this kind of narrative then vindicates a key argument in Chaudhuri's analysis, although she makes it in relation to economic imperialism in the era of globalization rather than religious intolerance: Feminism is appropriated by governmentalities, such that women from marginalized communities are "pitted solely against their unruly men,"<sup>10</sup> who in turn become the "bad subjects of modernity."<sup>11</sup>

### III

#### **The New Woman and Mainstream Hindi Cinema: Some Observations**

In her analysis of the emerging subjects of modernity and the strategic positions in which they are deployed, Chaudhuri also diagnoses the spread of a neoliberal malaise – a new figure in post-globalization India: The "New/ Liberated/ Modern Woman, commodified as a selling strategy for conspicuous consumption," who apparently makes her own autonomous choices, is free to pursue her own work and leisure, and is capable of articulating her socio-economic independence and ascendancy through her consumption practices.<sup>12</sup> This shift in the narrativization of gender and womanhood in India ushered in a host of transformed cultural desires, fuelling the engines of consumerism.

And, more powerfully than ever, Bollywood now came to determine the ways in which this emergent politics around gender and sexuality was represented and inscribed within Indian consumer behaviour in the 1990s. To that end, glo-

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<sup>10</sup> Chaudhuri, "Introduction," 39.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 40.

balization's dalliance with hegemonic cultural nationalisms across transnational boundaries has often been analysed by looking at mainstream Hindi cinema specifically, heavy-handedly geared as it is towards NRI (Non-Resident Indian) populations in the West. Inderpal Grewal's analysis of the making and marketing of an "Indian" Barbie doll, with particular appeal for NRI markets in the chapter "Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationalities and the Global Consumer" within her monograph *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005) gestures towards similar possibilities. She writes:

While the Barbie product could only come to India because of the Indian government's changing policies of economic liberalization in the 1980s, it began to make inroads into the consumer market only when it could be understood within a discursive context created by the transnationalization of the beauty and fashion industry in India as well as the transnational connectivities produced by diasporic Indians.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note the paradox wrought by globalization here: On the one hand, there is something aspirational about White femininity, as is evidenced by a Euro-American Barbie wearing Indian clothes or the glamourization of certain inter-racial celebrity marriages that Grewal draws our attention to; on the other hand, there is the development of an increasingly parochial attitude about "traditional" Indian values in reaction against what would be perceived as the loose sexual mores of the West. In the 1990s, this tension could be observed in mainstream Bollywood cinema, with more and more movies projecting the NRI as someone who harbours feelings of deep nostalgia and yearns for India's sanctified cultural values in a land far away from home.

In the now-iconic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), which can be translated as "The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride," for instance, the hero and the heroine fall in love in Europe, but stay doggedly loyal to their cultural traditions.<sup>14</sup> They do not consummate their union outside of marriage because the hero, by his own admission, recognizes the worth of an Indian woman's virtue; they do not elope, even though the heroine's marriage has been arranged to a man in her native Punjab, because the hero seeks her father's blessing, without which the union would be tarnished; and finally their love emerges victorious because, despite the time they spent together in Europe, they adhere to the scripts of gender governing love and romance in India.

The heroine in this family is in many ways a damsel in distress, which is a widely used trope in Hindi cinema. But *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, along with other films of its ilk, illustrates that with Indian society's opening up to the values of Western modernity and individualism, the nature of the damsel's distress has changed: from the threat of violation to the denial of the freedom to marry the man of her choice. She would often fall for a man outside of her own class and her disapproving father

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<sup>13</sup> Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, directed by Aditya Chopra (India: AA Films, 1995).

would arrange her marriage to a groom better suited for her status. It would then fall upon the knight in shining armour to convince the damsel's family to give him her hand and rescue the passive damsel from an unhappy marriage. On a greater scale, beyond the narratives of individual films, the damsel-saviour dynamic then often became representative of the NRI being the masculine protector and guardian of the feminized Indian nation in distress.

Thus, the emigrant had to be imagined as a dyed-in-the-wool Indian at heart, loyal to an "authentic" Hindu identity and masculinity even as he conquers a multi-cultural America. By extension, the Indian woman in post-liberalization India, too, had to toe the line between an aspirational Western femininity (insofar as it denotes economic power) and a culturally anchored Hindu ideal of womanhood that demands the rejection of such influences.

But it is not as if the emigrant is always shown as a torchbearer of tradition, representing a Hindu cultural nationalism in the West. Instead, Bollywood also demarcates a distinction between the good NRI and the bad NRI. In another film, *Pardes* (Foreign Land, 1997),<sup>15</sup> the heroine is a doe-eyed epitome of Hindu womanhood whose marriage is arranged to an Indian working in the US. When this fiancé turns out to be a depraved and licentious alcoholic and, therefore, a villain corrupted by "Western" influences, the heroine has to be saved from his clutches by a son-of-the-soil archetype who vindicates her honour. Films like this have come to embody latent anxieties around the transformation of gender norms effected by globalization, hinging their narratives upon an East-West binary in an era of potentially dangerous miscegenation. Grewal points this out:

In particular, women's sexuality was disciplined in diasporic locations through nostalgic representations of an Indian tradition of women's virginity and purity that were bolstered by the Bombay cinema's dominant discourses, and were negotiated in terms of a pure India where the daughter's sexuality is believed to be safeguarded and an impure West where it is constantly in jeopardy.<sup>16</sup>

However, it was in the nature of globalization as a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon – and indeed, an overzealous marketing strategy – to disturb water-tight binaries, and Bollywood cinema was poised at more than a few ambivalent intersections in the 1990s. Whereas in the decades following Independence, the "bad woman" or "vamp" in Hindi films was an immoral temptress, who seduced the hero into straying from the path of ideal conduct, globalization made her aspirations appear less villainous or profligate. Earlier, she served as a foil to the heroine of the film, who was usually the staid and virtuous lover or wife of the male protagonist. But with a change in the perception of modernity, this "bad woman" became less of an evil caricature. Her heavily Westernized apparel (and therefore, her consumption patterns) came to determine the most popular trends and her styling as a go-getter or a liberated woman, working her way up by dint of sheer perseverance, resonated

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<sup>15</sup> *Pardes*, directed by Subhash Ghai (India: Mukta Arts, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Grewal, *Transnational America*, 117.

with an Indian public in thrall to the promises of liberalization. In the 2000s, this portrayal underwent another round of transformations as the internet boom played a significant role in not only increasing the consumption of global films, but also in proliferating the discourses of Western liberal feminism in South Asia. As a result, the “bad girl” went even further away from being seen as a corrupting influence upon traditional Indian cultural values to being a *soi-disant* feminist icon, defying the moral imperatives of the past. Here too, as in the marketing of the Barbie doll, liberal feminist ideology, shaped by Western individualism, was deployed as a key tactic to sell the image of a “New Indian Woman.”

It is by looking at these linkages between the emergence of new cultural texts and scripts of gender and the larger metanarratives constructed by contemporaneous socio-economic and geopolitical phenomena that one understands the need for a cultural studies framework in the project of studying the lives and afterlives of feminism in South Asia. The feminist discourse that arrives at our doorstep after a long transnational passage is naturally riven by contradictory tendencies; the journey complicates things. But it is such complications within the domain of culture that widen the space for interventions which might challenge the mastery of any particular body of theory. So transformative are these complications that no theory that passes through them can claim to be pure or originary. In fact, new feminisms emerge from contestations upon contestations played out in the theatre of our cultural realities. And it is by tracing the trajectories of these offshoots, while recognizing the ways in which the dominant cultural zeitgeist comes to appropriate the impulses of feminism to its own ends, that we can perhaps arrive at an understanding of how our feminisms embed themselves within the complex social content of contemporary India.