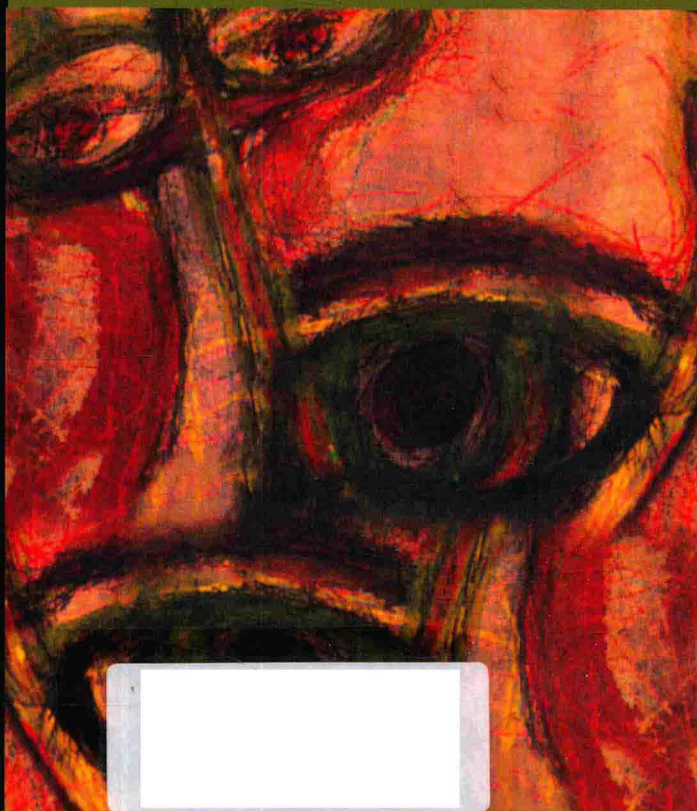


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Themes in Politics

GENDER AND POLITICS IN INDIA



EDITED BY

NIVEDITA MENON

Gender and Politics in India

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Nivedita Menon

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Gender and Politics in India

Themes in Politics Series

GENERAL EDITORS

Rajeev Bhargava
Partha Chatterjee

The Themes in Politics series aims to bring together essays on important issues in Indian political science and politics—contemporary political theory, Indian social and political thought, and foreign policy, among others. Each volume in the series will bring together the most significant articles and debates on each issue, and will contain a substantive introduction and an annotated bibliography.

Note from the General Editors

Teaching of politics in India has long suffered because of the systematic unavailability of readers with the best contemporary work on the subject. The most significant writing in Indian politics and Indian political thought is scattered in periodicals; much of the recent work in contemporary political theory is to be found in inaccessible international journals or in collections that reflect more the current temper of Western universities than the need of Indian politics and society.

The main objective of this series is to remove this lacuna. The series also attempts to cover as comprehensively and usefully as possible the main themes of contemporary research and public debate on politics, to include selections from the writings of leading specialists in each field, and to reflect the diversity of research methods, ideological concerns and intellectual styles that characterize the discipline of political science today.

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RAJEEV BHARGAVA
PARTHA CHATTERJEE

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Introduction

Nivedita Menon

It is by now generally accepted that there is no one women's movement in India, but rather, several women's movements. That is, when we consider movements that specifically raise questions of gender, it is clear that in terms of political understanding, ideology, social base and modes of action, there are rich, complex and contentious debates that rage among them. In addition, 'the women's movement' is often used also to refer to women's participation in politics in general and not just to the specific interventions in politics which challenge various forms of patriarchy and gender injustice. These features have contributed towards outlining a field which is remarkable for its dissonances and disputes as much as for what still holds it together—so that it is possible after all, to refer to 'the women's movement' in India—a concern with gender inequity, however that is defined.

This volume will present a view of feminist theory and politics in India by identifying some key issues in terms of opposing or at least, differing positions on them from within the movement. There are seven sections. In the first section on *environment and gender*, the discussion centres around Vandana Shiva's conception of ecofeminism and critiques of it by Gabriele Dietrich and Bina Agarwal on the grounds of its silence on caste hierarchies and its essentializing of 'women'. In the next section on *work* Nandita Shah et al. address the debates on structural adjustment and its debilitating impact on women, while Rohini Hensman asks whether feminism ought to have a more positive, nuanced attitude to new technology. In the third section on *law*, Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman argue for a reconceptualization of 'equality' so that the

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actual conditions of women's subordination can be taken into account, while Nivedita Menon makes a more fundamental critique of law, suggesting that feminist politics needs to rethink altogether the terms of its engagement with legal discourse. Next, in the section on *the women's movement*, three extracts from the work of Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, Radha Kumar and Ilina Sen, reflect on the forms of organizations within the women's movement, the trends within the movement up to the last decade, and the possibilities of a dialogue between Marxism and feminism in the Indian context. In the section on *women, community and rights*, two essays by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, and by Veena Das, explore in different ways the manner in which feminist politics must engage with the state on the one hand and with community on the other, in a context in which nationhood, community identity and women's rights are in extremely contested relationships with one another. In the sixth section, the extracts map out debates within the terrain of a question central to feminist politics, that of women's agency. While Vidya Rao's looks at *thumri* as a confined space whose limits have nevertheless been creatively subverted by women singers, thus raising questions for broader feminist practice as struggle, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana address the dilemma for feminist politics arising from the visible presence of active women in Hindu right-wing and upper-caste movements that are in direct confrontation with the broad democratic ideals of the women's movement. In the final section on *sexuality*, a paper by Ruth Vanita presses for the need for the women's movement to rethink fundamentally the very idea of gender, and the anthropomorphism with which it is conceived.

In this introductory chapter, we will present a picture of Indian politics, in broad strokes, derived from the large body of feminist scholarship spanning decades. We will focus on shared understandings, so that we can place the differences, when we get to them, in perspective.

Feminist Critiques of 'The Golden Vedic Age'

It has come to be commonly believed among the middle classes that the Vedic period was the golden age of Indian womanhood. It is accepted that the status of women was very high in that period, and that it was only with the coming of invaders, especially Muslims, that restrictions began to be placed on women. All the evils of the nineteenth century—purdah, sati, female infanticide—

were explained as outcomes of fears for women's safety which had their origins in a time of invasions.

Contemporary feminist scholars argue that such a history is the product of the nineteenth century interaction between colonialism and nationalism. A significant tool used by colonial ideology to prove the inferiority of the subject population was the question of the status of women. The moral inferiority of Indians, especially Hindus, was supposed to be demonstrated by the barbaric practices followed against women—this was argued by Christian missionaries as well as by historians like James Mill. Writing in the nineteenth century, Mill considered Hindu civilization to be crude and immoral. Thus, colonial historians justified British rule in India by arguing that Hindu women required the protection and intervention of the colonial state.

The reaction to this kind of characterization of Indian/Hindu society took the form of a school of nationalist history writing by historians like Altekar and R.C. Dutt, who challenged colonial history writing by presenting the argument outlined above, that the evils of Indian society were attributable to Muslim invasions. That is, the patriarchal features of Hindu society were explained entirely as a response to external threats.

Historians like Uma Chakravarty (1993, 1989) and Kumkum Roy (1995) question this construction of the past at several levels. First, they point out that the evidence used by nationalist historians is exclusively drawn from brahmanical sources, and is therefore, a partial history at best. Moreover, even if, as they argue, the status of upper caste women was high, which is contested by feminist historians, it was at the expense of the exploitation of non-Aryan peoples, especially women.

Second, Vedic texts focused on specific geographical areas, early texts referred to the North-West of the subcontinent, later texts to the east around the mid-Gangetic valley and the Manusmriti to India north of the Vindhyas. From these texts, nineteenth century historians extrapolated a picture of 'Vedic India', an unsustainable generalization because 'India' as an entity came into being only in the nineteenth century through the encounter with colonialism. Thus, defining the past in terms of a 'Vedic India' presents a falsely homogeneous picture, a homogeneity which is then violated apparently, only by external interventions.

Third, even from the brahmanical sources alone, there is sufficient evidence to show that the structure of institutions that ensured the subordination of women was complete long before Muslims as a religious community had even come into being.

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Referring specifically to the two features which the nationalist argument uses—scholarship and property—contemporary feminist historians of ancient India explode the myth of the superior position of women in the Vedic period. Regarding scholarship, they point out that less than one per cent of the one thousand hymns of the Rig Veda are attributed to women, which clearly shows the marginal position of women scholars. Further, Uma Chakravarty points out that the famous and oft-repeated story about the debate between Gargi and Yajnavalkya, celebrated as an example of the learning allowed to women, is an episode in which Gargi is finally silenced and eliminated from the contest by Yajnavalkya, not by the force of his arguments but because he threatens her—‘Gargi, do not question too much, lest your head fall off’

As for property, women not only did not own property, they were considered to *be* property, the bride, for example, being gifted to the groom along with other goods. Women were excluded from participating in a variety of material transactions, from giving and receiving *dakshina* on ritual occasions, to giving and receiving tribute and taxes. Women had a certain limited recognition only as wives and mothers within the patriarchal kinship structure.

Clearly then, the golden age of Indian womanhood was a selective picture of the past created in the context of the politics of the nineteenth century.

Social Reform Movements of the Nineteenth Century

There was no one uniform movement for social reform, but different campaigns on locally specific issues which were taken up at different times. By and large, these movements as well as the resistance to such reform were decisively shaped by the colonial encounter. Prominent sections of the bourgeoisie were intent on reforming what colonial discourse presented as primitive and barbaric aspects of Hindu society, while resistance came from revivalist nationalists who challenged the colonial interventions into ‘Indian tradition’. Although reformists and revivalists defined themselves in opposition to one another, they also shared more than they would recognize. For instance, Ashis Nandy (1983) has shown how both shared the ideal of the anti-imperialist hero as ‘manly’, in the terms set by Victorian ideology, rejecting the more ambiguous, androgynous qualities which marked Indian traditions

of the ideal man—Krishna, Ram, and the ideals of Sufi and Bhakti traditions, because Indian traditions were dismissed contemptuously as ‘effeminate’ by the British. Similarly, both reformers and revivalists shared a belief in a glorious pre-colonial pre-Muslim past where women were worshipped, and both used nationalist arguments, though mobilizing this picture of the past in different ways—reformers to demonstrate that Indians still had the capacity to meet the enlightened standards of the West, and thus, were fit for self-government, and revivalists to assert that Indian/Hindu ‘traditions’ had the inner resources to deal with its problems, and did not need foreign/imperialist intervention.

The focus of social reform movements reflected the concerns of the upper castes who constituted the bourgeoisie (Kumar, 1993). The issues the movements raised—widows’ oppression, purdah, growing gender gap in education—did not affect the majority of Indian women. The majority of the total female population was involved in agrarian, manufacturing and trading activities, whether as part of household or family based enterprises or as independent workers, producers and traders. The status of these women was generally governed by local or community customs, which often gave more freedom than was available to higher-caste women, governed by the Manusmriti. As for education, the sex ratio among the illiterate population was almost the same, and the gender gap in traditional institutions for elementary education was not as high as it became under the English system.

Similarly, in the case of Sati, recent historical research suggests that the nineteenth century Sati abolition movement created the myth of a widespread practice when it seems to have been rather exceptional (Yang, 1987). The only evidence of widespread incidence of Sati is for the early decades of the nineteenth century in Bengal, for which there may be specific reasons. First, the majority of these incidents were recorded at the height of the Sati abolition movement in the province governed by the chief British opponent of Sati, William Bentinck. It is possible that these figures conflate suicide by widows with ritual Sati—partly out of ignorance and partly deliberately, to prove the gravity of the problem. In response to this picture presented by the colonial government, there may indeed have been a rise in incidents of Sati in Bengal, as part of the deliberate assertion of a supposed ‘tradition’ by a community perceiving itself to be in crisis. The practice was largely found among