

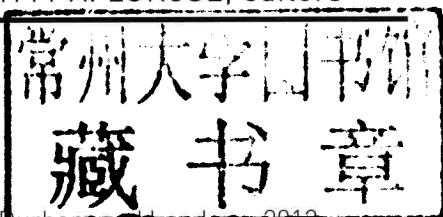
South Asian Feminisms



ANIA LOOMBA and RITTY A. LUKOSE, editors

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South Asian Feminisms

Contemporary Interventions

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS, originating in a conference held at the University of Pennsylvania, presents recent interventions in key areas of feminist scholarship and activism in South Asia.¹ Over the last four decades, the various nations in this region—India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Afghanistan—have been the location as well as the focus of important feminist work that has contributed to rethinking colonial and post-colonial history and literature, law, culture and the nation-state, domesticity and the family, religious and ethnic identities, sexualities, and labor relations. *South Asian Feminisms* builds upon this legacy as it engages complex new challenges to feminist theory and activism that have emerged in recent years. Our contention is that such feminist engagements in this region (with its long-standing and cross-cutting histories of colonialism, nationalism, and women's movements, as well as contemporary struggles around sexuality, religion, human rights, war, peace, globalization, and contemporary iterations of empire and the exploitation of labor) can productively enrich the larger horizon of feminist theorizing. Thus the volume attests to the specificity of diverse South Asian locations and concerns, while also staging a dialogue with other attempts to rethink the central question of "difference" within contemporary feminist theory and praxis.

Recent developments in postcolonial South Asia have re-

sulted in a crisis of feminist thinking and organizing, through which some vital perspectives have emerged—perspectives that can be salutary beyond the region. Threats to women’s freedom (in the holistic sense of the term) have escalated, posed by the rise of religious fundamentalisms within and across national boundaries, on the one hand, and intensifying state repression and militarism, on the other. The most recent phase of globalization has led to sharper conflicts over land, water, and resources, as well as to increasing disempowerment and forced migration for large sections of postcolonial populations in the region. It has also produced new conditions and types of employment for women and new arenas and sites for articulating gender and sexual identities. The last few decades have also been marked by the appropriation of feminist vocabularies and agendas by local and national governments, NGOs, and international funding organizations, which readily speak of women’s “empowerment” and participation, but in ways that blunt the edge of feminist critiques, offering patronage instead of a fundamental redistribution of resources, or envisaging individual advancement while disabling collective opposition.² This has, in turn, resulted in some disenchantment on the part of feminists with their own previous agendas, such as the advocacy of legal reform or rights-based agitations. At the same time, however, new forms of feminist activism have also sprung up, such as those centering on sex work and sexual equality, against militarism, and against oppressive forms of globalized labor. Such new formations have resulted in more vital and dynamic interconnections between theory and activism, and between “South Asia” and “the West,” which this volume explicitly highlights.

Accordingly, we have organized the book to highlight dialogues across different locations in South Asia, as well as between scholars and activists. Given the diversity of issues and histories involved, no single volume can aspire to comprehensive coverage. Nor can it be free of the geopolitics within the region (hence the predominance of essays on India). Nevertheless, this volume foregrounds a diverse and dynamic set of contributions to feminist theorizing and activism. It is in recognition of such diversity, and the fact that there are necessarily enormous debates and divergences between feminists in the region and beyond, that we use the word “feminisms” in the book’s title and in this introduction. At the same time, we also sometimes use the word “feminism” in the singular when we wish to indicate particular aspects of this larger plurality, or when we refer to the idea of

feminism as a general concept or horizon of hope and desire, or when we indicate a terrain shared by various groupings or locations. Indeed, it is only in the vibrant interaction between such specificities and differences on the one hand, and shared desires and endeavors on the other, that feminist futures can be imagined.

The sixteen essays included here are grouped into six sections. The first deals with the challenge of religious fundamentalism and secularism for feminist work in both India and Pakistan, and examines how religion shapes the agency of both Hindu and Muslim women. The second section engages with the challenges for feminist labor organizing in the wake of recent forms of globalization in India and Sri Lanka. The next offers feminist critiques of militarization and state repression in Sri Lanka and India, and evaluates some recent forms of peace activism and resistance that have emerged there. The fourth section takes up the question of representations—literary as well as historical—and the questions they pose to feminists today in Bangladesh and India. The fifth section considers the histories and challenges of organizing sex workers in India and Bangladesh, including queer approaches to sex worker activism. The final section interrogates the limits as well as potential of taking South Asia as the grounds for new theoretical work in feminism. Together, they testify to the fact that in South Asia, it is not possible to imagine that one has entered a postfeminist age, or a time beyond politics; as a result, feminist engagements in the region eschew both complacency and despair as they highlight critical new challenges that face them.

In this introduction, we discuss key features of these political and ideological developments and elaborate on some concerns crucial to this book. We first highlight feminist rethinking with respect to two issues that have hitherto been central to postcolonial feminists everywhere, but especially in South Asia: first, the historical recovery of the precolonial and colonial past, and second, the postcolonial formation of the nation-state. We show how such rethinking, along with significant new developments in the region and globally, has revised the relationship between “theory” and “praxis,” a question that we turn to more explicitly in the third section of this introduction. Here, we elaborate how the different essays contribute to critically rethinking feminist praxis across different sites of intervention. These revisions, we suggest, are in continuous (if often unacknowledged) dialogue with other challenges to mainstream feminism in the

global North. Finally, we turn to the institutional and disciplinary histories and developments that shape the interaction between feminist inquiry and the entity called “South Asia,” in the academy and beyond.

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

Feminist scholarship about South Asia was in its earlier stages understandably preoccupied with undoing the legacy of colonial epistemologies and knowledges, and offering insights into nationalism and the postcolonial state; thus interrogations of histories of the colonial past, decolonization, and the making of postcolonial nations were its major burdens. Maitrayee Chaudhuri argues that in India it was “feminist *historical* research” that “laid the grounds for theorizing feminism.”³ In other parts of South Asia as well, new understandings about female agency, the workings of patriarchy, and possible agendas for postcolonial feminism emerged through feminist reevaluations of the place of gender in anticolonial nationalisms, in colonial constructions of gender and sexuality, and in the creation of the different nation-states of the subcontinent.

For example, Kumari Jayawardena’s now classic *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) traced the deep historical roots of feminism in Asia and parts of the Middle East by examining feminism’s relations with nationalist movements. This book argued that feminism was not a Western import, but emerged organically in many parts of the once-colonized world through anti-imperial struggles. Another pioneering and enormously influential work was an edited collection, *Recasting Women* (1989), that analyzed colonial and indigenous constructions of Indian women from the so-called Vedic past to the heyday of anticolonial activity. The fact that *Recasting Women* offered rewritings of colonial *history*, even though its two editors, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, were trained in English literary studies, testifies to the hospitality of literary and cultural critique to early feminist scholarship in South Asia, much as it had been in the West.⁴ Such work explicitly demanded a questioning of established disciplinary protocols, which may explain the “sanctioned ignorance” on the part of mainstream Indian historians to feminist interventions that has been noted by Janaki Nair.⁵

Of course, South Asian feminists simultaneously offered major revisions of other scholarly disciplines and areas of inquiry, most notably

literature, law, economics, and sociology, and they also intervened in established modes of activism and organizing.⁶ But history has continued to be disproportionately central to feminist scholarship in South Asia, in part because of the nature of postcolonial politics in the entire region.⁷ The spectacular rise of communalism, sectarian violence, and militarism has necessitated a continued feminist engagement with histories of religious identity, community, and social memory. Thus Urvashi Butalia's path-breaking investigation into the gendered aspects of the communal violence of the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan was catalyzed, she explains, by the horrific escalation of such violence in the 1980s, and specifically the anti-Sikh riots that erupted in Delhi after the 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards.⁸ Feminist historians had to engage anew with the long lineages of Hindu cultural nationalism following the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists, an event that ushered in an era of heightened anti-Muslim rhetoric and practices.⁹ Analogously, Neloufer de Mel writes that her account of the gendered history of Sri Lankan nationalism was impelled by contemporary "ethno-nationalism [that] has produced one of the harshest ethnic wars of South Asia in which thousands of lives have been lost, property destroyed, welfare, education and health programs have been neglected and a culture of violence taken root."¹⁰ In contrast, the long lineages of anticolonial or nationalist history have occupied less space in the writings of Pakistani feminists, who have been far more engaged, for good reasons, with the role of Islam in women's struggles in independent Pakistan, especially since they were "jolted into action by the Islamization process started by Zia-ul-Haq in 1979."¹¹

Feminist engagements with history were impelled by contemporary South Asian politics and were prone to be evaluated through the lens of such politics. Take, for example, Lata Mani's extremely important essay on *sati* or widow immolation. Mani showed how this practice became a "site" for colonial authorities and Indian nationalist men of different persuasions to engage with each other, marginalizing women's voices and obscuring their desires. She suggested that perhaps female agency could be located as much in some widows' desire to die on their husbands' pyres as in other women's desire *not* to do so.¹² While this essay became especially visible in the West because it dovetailed with critiques of colonial discourse and questions of subaltern speech and agency that were being raised by post-

colonial theory, it became very controversial in the subcontinent itself, where the revival of incidents of actual widow immolation demanded immediate feminist intervention.¹³

Today, the need for historical reevaluation remains as important as ever, and feminists are increasingly turning to innovative ways of engaging with history. Here, Mrinalini Sinha assesses the adequacy of established historical tools for understanding gender formations at the end of the twentieth century in India; Anjali Arondekar comments on the nature of historical records as they pertain to the figure of the *devadasi* (variously understood as temple dancer, prostitute, or sex worker); Atreyee Sen and Amina Jamal evaluate the uses of history among religiously inflected women's organizations (the right-wing Hindu Shiv Sena in India and the Muslim Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, respectively). All of these essays are self-consciously interested in the methodological, theoretical, and political insights such engagements with history can offer contemporary feminists. Thus, Arondekar shows how in recent years the *devadasi* has been recast as a figure who possesses artistic, juridical, economic, and sexual agency. Such a figure, Arondekar observes, can function as an anachronistic backward projection of the contemporary feminist critic's own desires for a sexually radical and economically autonomous subject. Arondekar examines the investments that contemporary sexuality studies in the region have in such a figure by attending to the history of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, a *devadasi* community in western India. By tracing the colonial and post-colonial histories of the Samaj, the essay both reframes the question of the history of *devadasis* and illustrates the ways in which contemporary Indian feminism is being reshaped and reconfigured through the more consolidated emergence of sexuality studies. This essay is in productive conversation with three others in the book—those by Firdous Azim, Toorjo Ghose, and Ashwini Sukthankar—that deal with the challenges of organizing sex workers today.

It is also significant that the two essays in this volume that revisit the relationship between Western and South Asian feminisms do so by rereading history. Ratna Kapur describes the ways in which the postcolonial feminist movement in India has arrived at an impasse, one that is shared by left and other progressive movements, because of its ongoing attachment to liberal-colonial notions of historical progress, "rights," and "equality." She suggests that only by abandoning such a narrative can South Asian

feminists both engage with postcolonial theory and look back anew at their own historical and philosophical traditions, which are capable of yielding radical ways of conceptualizing gender, identity, and freedom. Mrinalini Sinha revisits well-known accounts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian women to ask whether we unthinkingly continue to interpret non-European contexts and histories through Eurocentric understandings of gender identities, which were themselves produced by the positing of binary differences between men and women. Drawing on recent ethnographic and historical work that demonstrates the pluralities of gender in South Asia, she suggests that it is time to see whether the specificities of South Asia can yield alternative views of the conceptual categories of gender and sexuality, such as those suggested by Afsaneh Najmabadi in the case of Iran.¹⁴

These essays depart from earlier feminist writings by suggesting that both historical and feminist methodologies are in need of simultaneous revision.¹⁵ In other words, we cannot use self-evident feminist insights to scrutinize history. Both Kapur and Sinha also urge us, albeit in very different ways, to take very seriously what is offered by the specific histories and philosophical traditions of the region. As opposed to earlier feminists, they are less squeamish about asking for a renewed engagement with local “pasts” and the articulation of local differences that can be useful for feminist rethinking about identity, although both are careful to distance such a plea from the nativist insistence on the “special/essential” nature of a unique and untranslatable local history or culture. Indeed, both urge South Asian feminists to engage with feminists elsewhere—Kapur with a “postcolonial feminism” critical of the “liberal project” that has stymied some South Asian feminists, and Sinha with African, Iranian, and Western feminists who are currently rethinking categories of gender analysis. In other words, both suggest that the specificity of South Asia, in conjunction with a breadth of vision, might allow us to expand the contours of feminist theory and escape the stranglehold of ideas that have emerged from a liberal-colonial history, while also providing resources for confronting the contemporary challenges of feminisms. An analogous engagement with feminists elsewhere also marks other essays in this volume, notably those by Flavia Agnes, who draws on the notion of intersectionality as articulated by the African American legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to suggest ways in which Indian feminists need to think about religious difference along-

side gender difference; Malathi de Alwis, who finds Judith Butler's notion of the political useful for thinking about the contributions of feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka; and Laura Brueck, who draws upon Sharon Marcus's notion of a "rape script" to draw attention to the fiction of contemporary Dalit women. These essays make clear that today, feminists are in a position to reevaluate not just the failures of the postcolonial state, or the legacies of colonialism and nationalism, but also their own earlier presuppositions about feminism. Such a reevaluation does not worry overly about an opposition between feminism in South Asia and in the West, although it certainly articulates *differences* that it hopes to arrive at through a dialogue with other feminists, regionally, in the global South, and beyond.

THE NATION, SOUTH ASIA, AND BEYOND

In exploring divergent ways through which feminisms in South Asia can both reinvigorate themselves and become exemplary beyond their own locales, many contributors signal a second distinctive feature of *South Asian Feminisms*—a departure from the boundaries and constrictions of the nation-state, within which most feminist scholarship on the region has hitherto been confined. Such departures, we suggest, also mark the possibilities of further dialogues between feminist work on South Asia and feminist scholarship that has, from other locations, queried the politics of national borders and scrutinized the histories of migration and the constitution of diasporic communities, especially as these dovetail with the uneven histories of colonialism and contemporary global politics.¹⁶

The religious and ethnic violence that accompanied the very formation of postcolonial nation-states in South Asia only deepened in the late twentieth century; therefore it is not surprising that the nation and its discontents, margins, and exclusions have been the persistent focus of feminist inquiry in South Asia. Feminist scholarship in the region has extensively scrutinized the relationship of women to religious nationalism and communalism, reflecting on the differences as well as shared concerns across different nation-states. In Pakistan and Bangladesh the emphasis has been on deepening Islamicization, in India on the aggressive expansion of the Hindu Right, and in Sri Lanka on the violence marking the strife between Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms.¹⁷

While it is understandable that South Asian feminists were largely preoccupied with how nationalist political and legal frameworks enabled or retarded feminist praxis, there remains the danger that such preoccupations can result in inward-looking analyses, both at the level of the nation-state and at the level of particular regions, ethnicities, or religious identities. In South Asia, anticolonial policies/politics developed in crucibles of distinctive regional and linguistic affiliations and cultural formations that were entrenched by colonial rule. So, for example, Bengali nationalists would not necessarily include their counterparts in Maharashtra or Punjab in crafting a cultural vision of the Indian nation for which they were fighting; nor would most Hindu nationalists include Muslims. In studying such partial conceptions of the nation, however critically, we run the risk of replicating their exclusions by letting the part we study stand in for the whole we wish to theorize. Thus, for example, the gendered dynamics of colonial Bengal have tended to become the basis for theorizing anticolonial nationalism in general. Within Bengal itself, the Hindu family and Hindu nationalism have been the dominant objects of scrutiny, and it is important not to use them as shorthand for “Indian” familial formations. For feminists, it is particularly important to be wary of reinforcing, even if unconsciously, the very national, religious, or communitarian asymmetries that they seek to analyze in the past as well as in the contemporary moment.

Flavia Agnes was one of the first to point out that in trying to assert its difference from the West, and “in order to establish [its] ‘Indianness,’” the feminist movement “relied on Hindu iconography and Sanskrit idioms denoting female power, thus inadvertently strengthening the communal ideology [for which] Indian, Hindu and Sanskrit are synonymous.”¹⁸ When feminists concentrate on exposing the workings of communalism or casteism, the unwitting result can be the continued projection of Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and others as simply marginalized objects; as subjects, they can tell stories that may surprise feminists. This is what Agnes suggests in her essay for the present volume. She writes that since the passage of the controversial Muslim Women’s Act in 1986, which debarred Muslim women from seeking alimony in court, the Indian media has relentlessly projected a “Muslim woman” victimized by Muslim patriarchy. But as a lawyer Agnes has found that Muslim women have continued to seek alimony, and surprisingly, the courts have continued to award it to them. Agnes probes this apparent contradiction by tracking what actually hap-

pens in specific court battles, and suggests that media insistence on Muslim women's oppression, often underscored by feminists as well, has blinded us to the actual struggles and victories that are now taking place.

If in India the Hindu majoritarian violence that permeates the public sphere also shapes feminist vocabularies and visions, similar nationalist-religious tendencies are rehearsed by the feminist movement in Pakistan, even if historic parallels are not exact.¹⁹ Amina Jamal's essay in this volume scrutinizes the religiosity of Muslim women in the Jamaat-e-Islami today, placing it in the context of a vexed relationship between the religious and the secular in Pakistani nation-state formation. Jamal argues that such religiosity has been shaped by a long and specifically South Asian tradition of Islamic piety and social action that is now rapidly being transformed by contemporary Western military and discursive assaults on Muslim societies through the so-called War on Terror (which has a specific salience for Pakistan).

How women's agency has been enabled by religiosity is also addressed by Atreyee Sen, who examines the militancy of women affiliated with the Hindu right-wing organization, the Shiv Sena. In Mumbai slums, such women reach out to and mobilize the poor by narrating stories of past heroes and heroines. Sen suggests that such appropriations of history by right-wing women challenge feminists to think anew about contemporary forms of agency. As a spate of recent publications testifies, this is an urgent question for feminists in all the regions of South Asia.²⁰ If women are not just "victims" of right-wing ideologies, but also articulate and enforce them, what does this say for the feminist desire to unify all women and mobilize them against the workings of patriarchy? Examining Muslim and Hindu women's identities as they appear in different national contexts, these essays not only track the continued and transformed power of religious nationalisms in South Asia, but also critically examine the secularist agenda of feminists in different nations. These questions also emerged out of feminist work on the 1947 Partition of British India, as well as on contemporary communal violence, which has shown that women are not just targets of violence but also passionate advocates of the ideologies of community, honor, shame, revenge, and masculinity that shape such violence.²¹

While there are strong parallels between the situations in different South Asian nations, we cannot forget that there are also enormous asymmetries among them. As Niloufer de Mel has pointed out, "It is perhaps proof of