

# Culture, Feminism, Globalisation

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Across Asia and perhaps much of the non-Western world, for a century or more feminists have battled with dominant notions of “culture” that have also consolidated themselves in that time. The possibility of a comprehensive critique of social arrangements has foundered on the easy association of women and culture, whether in India or elsewhere in Asia. In debates over rape, domestic violence, sex work, or caste and community identity, issues of culture in relation to normative femininity have been foundational. Feminist interventions in India—from the anti-sati campaign to the uniform civil code (ucc) debate, from the Miss World beauty contest to the bar dancers’ case to the Pink Chaddi campaign to Kiss of Love—can be seen as contestations over the meaning and provenance of “culture.” Whether it gets configured as that which is holding back women from attaining gender equality, or is seen as the domain in which feminist interventions need to be fashioned (and a new cultural vocabulary forged); whether the cultural is seen as separate from the economic or whether the two are understood as deeply intertwined, the discussions around women and culture have become part of an uneasy common sense where key issues stay unresolved, only to erupt from time to time.

However, through the 20th century discourses of development and then of globalisation, the language of feminism actually enters mainstream discussions, providing readily available reference points for state initiatives as well as for the media, making it all the more difficult to pin down what could be at stake. The ongoing controversy over the BBC documentary *India’s Daughter* is one of the most recent examples of strange convergences over the culture–gender question with political opponents finding themselves on the same side in searching for a legal solution to a problem, however strenuously they may try to clarify the difference between their specific interests or their definitions of the problem.

## Gender-related Inquiry

This issue of the Review of Women’s Studies is an effort to map the scene of feminism today. It is a scene that is astonishingly diverse, its participants including people in their teens to those who are 80-plus. The diversity is not just in terms of age but also social background, as evident from the proliferation of self-identified feminist writing in a host of Indian languages. Their preoccupations can be gleaned from public forums (online and offline), college and university classrooms, and public meetings and activism of different kinds. So alongside the flattening out of the English-dominated vocabulary of feminist politics and the rendering obvious of issues now named

simply as empowerment or gender-equality, there is also an enormous opening out of gender-related inquiry, especially in Indian languages.<sup>1</sup> Except for two authors in this issue, the others have not engaged with the issues of translation this would pose for feminism. This applies, of course, only to the Indian papers, and not to the Chinese and Taiwanese ones, since the language question does not feature in those contexts in the same way it does in ours. While the engagement with creative writing and different kinds of representational practice is not something this issue has dealt with, it would be important to address it in a future issue dedicated to rethinking feminist vocabulary. What is being done here is to sound an alert—that the shrinking of our political imagination and its reduction to legal activism need to be addressed by reimagining the ways in which we want to think about our futures, and that this task requires inputs from diverse fields of activism and inquiry.

In this context, young feminists—both women and men—are trying to fashion new analytical tools with which to describe and understand the present moment. At the same time, they are conscious of the undertow of a century of activism and debate and how these might continue to shape our arguments. Does the culture and feminism debate still have any purchase today? Does it still frame responses to the issues we come up against? What happens when this apparently South Asian question is asked in another geographical location, or in cyberspace? In different and sometimes oblique ways, the contributors to this issue tackle these questions, often by restaging them amidst other questions about the past and future of feminism. Interestingly, although “culture” is not named as such in any of these papers, the “culture wars”—framed through issues of caste, community, gender identity, sexuality, risk/consent/agency—are never far from the surface, and their salience for thinking about gender today never in question.

When the papers for this issue were being solicited, a deliberate effort was made to find authors in other parts of Asia thinking about similar questions, and preoccupied with the languages of our political present. Although space considerations did not permit more contributions, we have included one from China and one from Taiwan so as to reiterate the value of comparative analysis, temper our enthusiastic Indian

We would like to thank the guest editor Tejaswini Niranjana and the members of the editorial advisory group of the Review of Women’s Studies, Mary E John, Kalpana Kannabiran, Padmini Swaminathan, Samita Sen and J Devika, for putting together this issue on the culture and feminism debate.

ethnocentrism, and initiate a conversation which might throw new light on our own concerns.

**Sexuality, Sex Work and Sexual Violence**

The brief for the authors in this issue was to find entry points for talking about a space of activism and analysis that would name itself as feminist, in short, to explore ways of discussing contemporary feminist politics. Thus they have not necessarily engaged with the vast body of feminist scholarship in India/Asia that spans disciplines from economics to history to literary studies to science studies. Nor have they looked at feminist involvement in large-scale international or state-supported development projects, or policymaking. It is even likely that the authors' preoccupations are drawn from somewhat circumscribed spheres of social engagement. However, they are sensitive to this issue, and reference it directly in their papers, emphasising its significance for how to think about feminist politics at a time when the average age of an Indian is only a little over 27. Issues of sexuality, sex work and sexual violence feature prominently in all the papers, whether the discussion is about digital "sluts" or about nudity in a domestic violence campaign. In parallel, our authors ask what it might mean to regulate spaces of online interaction,

and whether the increasing global focus on sexual violence is making invisible questions of caste and class that are central to discussing both sex work and sexuality.

It is not a coincidence that three out of the six papers focus on the digital domain, which has become a significant new location for critique and engagement by urban feminists in particular. Widely available and inexpensive internet connectivity in China ensures that more than 600 million people or close to 50% of the population is online today; in India it is projected that by 2018 about 50% of the population will be online (it is already more than 300 million and growing); in Taiwan, over 18 million people or approximately 80% of the population are connected on the internet.<sup>2</sup> In all these countries, access to the internet through mobile devices is rapidly overtaking conventional forms of access. As Nishant Shah, Sujatha Subramanian and Holly Lixian Hou all indicate, while slut-shaming and sexual pathologisation may indeed be exacerbated in cyberspace, at the same time new possibilities for feminist activism—including both the renegotiation of subjective choices and the opening up of new kinds of public engagement—are also opening up.

In different ways, Nitya Vasudevan and Naifei Ding examine the legacies of how we ask feminist questions, and what

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implications these legacies have for present-day analysis and intervention. Vasudevan looks at contemporary processes of sexualisation in India and the continuing tensions within feminist politics regarding the positioning of figures like the *jogini*, the bar dancer and the sex worker, arguing that what is at fault is the increasing separation between legal reform and social change. She calls for bringing back into circulation Ambedkarite concepts of the social, and for an interrogation of cultural histories of public-ness that legal interventions have solidified, so that we may move away “from the rigid polarities between Savarna and Dalit feminism, between bodies and sexual practices that are fully regulated by caste structures and bodies and practices that seem to speak outside of caste.”

Ding writes about the persistence of Cold War habits of thought and how they continue to inflect both us-led international feminist initiatives and the theorising of local phenomena in East Asia where feminists are often caught in the compulsion to align themselves with the United States (us)-defined notions of modernity. Ding explores how the condemnation of a certain form of sex work, defined as “backward and criminal,” was “translated into one of *the* universal lessons in women’s rights and feminist modernisation.” The sex wars of the us found their way into the “family division” of feminists in Taiwan through what Ding calls the “United-States-ism in East Asia.” She shows how “one part of feminism in the throes of a us domestic split in the early eighties is propelled outward into the international arena, where international law becomes medium of translation.” With figures like Catherine MacKinnon functioning as “cold (sex) warriors,” Taiwan “state feminists” work towards compliance with the priorities of the United Nations and of global media, leading, for example, to a determined attack in the name of feminism on licensed sex work. Ding’s telling analysis shows how “A ‘simple and feminist’ argument that impels convergence on ‘woman’ in terms of sexual harm could be at once transparent, efficient, expansive and transhistoric—inter-national.”

Both Phadke and Subramanian give us unusual descriptions of contemporary feminism in India, the first through a classroom ethnography and the second through an ethnography of social media activism. Phadke reflects on the disavowal of feminism in a post-globalisation world through a discussion of young women students in Mumbai city. She speaks about the way in which gender equality is positioned in a neo-liberal economy as both desirable and attainable, and how a pervasive kind of “gender consciousness” stems from “the very successes of the women’s movement.” This sort of gender consciousness, says Phadke, is manifesting itself in what she calls the “safety conversation” which frequently takes place “outside of the discourse of feminism.” In this context, claiming to be feminist is a risk, jeopardising heterosexual romance and family relationships. But in spite of this risk, as Phadke shows, there are many young women who aspire in their own ways to feminist futures.

Subramanian points to the difficulty of defining activism in conventional terms while studying feminism online, and

argues that online activism cannot be seen “merely as complementary to activism that takes place in the offline, physical world.” While consciousness raising, providing support structures, and expressing solidarity with other women all continue in online spaces, the digital domain in India is also opening up possibilities for the creation of new subjectivities and relationships. And even while “questions of violence inform most of the conversations that happen in online feminist spaces, the politics of pleasure is also an integral part of these spaces. Discussions of sexual pleasure and the creation of safe erotic spaces are facilitated by certain aspects of digital technology, most significantly, the possibility of anonymity.”

The startlingly different nature of internet activism in China as compared to India comes across vividly in Hou’s paper, which describes the enormous surge of debate on the microblogging site Weibo in the last few years. The internet activism of “grass-root feminists,” coming in the wake of the “feminist phobia” of post-Mao China, has attracted widespread public and state attention. While online platforms are used to organise offline protests and performances, the new forms of born-digital activism—including the Nudity against Domestic Violence campaign, the forms of nude solidarity against sexual harassment, and the “Vagina Event”—are defining a “corporeal” but decentred feminism in contemporary China. Unlike in India, where online activism may restrict access to less-privileged feminists, taking feminism online has actually made the discussions more widely available.

Shah draws our attention to the slippage between the “selfie” and the “slut” that takes place in the digital domain, due to the fact that born-digital objects are essentially prone to “leakage.” He looks at “slut-shaming” on the internet, arguing that unwarranted distinctions between the digital and the bodily self can prevent us from accounting for the technological and biological leakages between the two. Drawing attention through discussing the Uber rape case in Delhi to the new characterisation of digital fluency as a mark of sluttiness, he alerts us to how “control of visible bodies through digital shaming” requires a rethinking of existing regulations around data protection and net governance.

Together, these papers represent interdisciplinary efforts to forge new analytical frameworks within which to address the complex phenomena confronting feminists today.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Examples would include the writings and translations of J Devika in Malayalam, Pratibha Nandakumar and B N Sumitrabai in Kannada, Volga in Telugu, and the longlist of major feminist writers in Marathi and Bangla.
- 2 <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/03/world/china-internet-growth-2014/>; <http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/internet/google-india-indian-internet-users-to-surpass-us-in-2014/article6308559.ece>; <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/tw.htm>; <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/>, all accessed on 7 March 2015.