

## **Why culture matters: rethinking the language of feminist politics**

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The Inter-Asia Project, not least as it is exemplified in the *IACS* Journal, has enabled a variety of stimulating conversations across Asia. One such productive site of engagement with ‘Asian’ questions has been feminism. Although there are strong women’s movements in many countries in the region, they often deal by necessity with local issues (unless there are cross-border aspects involved, as in the case of sex-trafficking or migrants), and it is not always easy to find a point of access for understanding how different feminisms may speak to one another. I suggest that it may be necessary to go beyond looking at the real-time questions of feminist politics, and instead examine more closely the locations from where the questions originate. Such an examination, I propose, will have to focus on why culture matters to feminism. Having taken this detour, my essay will come back to the present to reflect on a new development in Indian feminism. As I show in my recent article, “Feminism and Cultural Studies in Asia”, instead of feminism being an interruption of already established ways of studying culture critically (as in 1970s England for example), it is foundational to the emergence of the new area of cultural studies (Niranjana 2007). It is foundational because of the way in which feminists have taken on – have had to take on - the culture question in non-western societies.

A standard criticism of feminism across Asia derives from a charge that it is disconnected or alienated from ‘our culture’. This is a charge that is seldom made against any of our other political frameworks which are far from having a clearly identifiable

‘indigenous’ source. Elsewhere, I have explained at some length why the question of culture - especially in formerly colonial contexts - cannot be separated from the question of how women come to be defined. In the course of this essay, I will elaborate on this issue with reference to India.

But first, a referencing of the inter-Asia context. Starting in 2000, I had the opportunity to be part of a series of feminist discussions in different Asian locations through the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies conferences. The first feminist panel discussion at Fukuoka in December 2000 tabled as a central question the often contentious relationship of women with the state, and many of the speakers talked about the difficulty of theorizing the question of women and that of gender through already settled vocabularies like that of class. In Bangalore in October 2001, my institution, CSCS, hosted the Feminisms in Asia conference, which brought together Asian women who discussed women and the state (in Iran and Singapore), women’s engagement with civil war (in Sri Lanka), feminism and religious identities (India, Malaysia), cultural minorities (India), queer citizenship (in Taiwan and China), women and the law (Bangladesh, India). An important concluding panel explored the critical vocabularies formulated by feminisms in Asia, and the tensions of translation from Western contexts. In many ways, the culture question was central to the different strands of this event. Shortly afterwards, in December 2001, the IACS Alternatives Workshop in Bangalore provided another forum for discussion of feminist questions. Coming in the wake of the Feminisms in Asia conference, and focusing on accommodating those who could not make it to the conference because of travel advisories after the 9/11 events, this workshop aimed at an assessment of the political-theoretical ground on which we stand. In a key panel, we

explored the current dilemmas of feminists regarding contemporary political initiatives, and investigated issues of cultural practice and feminist analysis. In later meetings (Seoul 2005, Shanghai 2007), inter-Asian feminists have theorized popular culture, Islamization and its consequences for women, the sex-workers' movement and its production of new subjectivities.

Again as I've said in the article I referred to above, bringing feminist issues into an Inter-Asia cultural studies frame has foregrounded the *culture* question and the specific negotiations all women in Asia and feminists in particular undertake; opened up the question of how to think about Asian *modernities*; prompted an investigation into the problems of *translation* in relation to the formation of the vocabularies of social criticism; urged us to re-think the *political* (what are the changing vocabularies of the political; is the political recognizable in the ways that it used to be?). Feminism appears to be one of the most volatile domains in Asia where the rethinking is taking place.

The culture question's importance for feminism in Asia might be illustrated by the following contrast. Feminist scholars in the West have suggested that nature and culture formed a binary. "[In western feminist history] the most common pair of terms to be evoked and fought over are nature and culture" (John 1998: 203). By analyzing the nature-culture binary, western feminists produced important critiques of organization of knowledge as well as institutions like family. Sherry Ortner, in her essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" argues that

every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products); and

further, that the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to “socialize” and “culturalize” nature. (Ortner 1974: 72-73)

According to her, it is the ‘the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women’ which have brought about this convention of regarding women as closer to nature, and hence subordinate to culture. However, in non-Western societies, women were historically seen as part of Culture. Feminist scholarship in India, for example, has been able to show that the formulation of notions of culture in India is crucially related to women in a variety of ways. This draws our attention to the significance of the culture question under colonial rule. With culture understood here as a mark of difference as well as superiority in relation to the colonizing West, we can gain insights into how a historically specific way of thinking about Indian women came to be naturalised or rendered obvious.<sup>1</sup>

The discussions about culture in gender theory in India are based on critiques of the nationalist project in both pre- and post-Independence phases. Feminists have looked at the time of the anti-colonial struggles and how a self-constructed Indian identity was born in opposition to the view the colonisers had of the natives. They have also gone on to theorise the post-Independence period, when efforts were underway to imagine India anew, as an independent nation that was no longer subject to British rule. This

imagination of India gave rise to a range of representations within various fields. In an astonishingly diverse set of writings spanning a range of disciplinary locations (history, sociology, literary studies, art history, film studies, political science) feminist scholars have analysed the formation of normative femininity as it takes shape in the context of discussions about Indianness and Indian culture.

### **Emergence of the culture question**

How are 'we' different from 'them'? This question is posed in the third world or more broadly non-Western societies as part of a colonial contestation. By this we mean a contest between colonizer and colonized on the relative merits of their cultures. With the onslaught of the colonizing West in India in the late 18th to early 19th century, colonized Indians responded by asserting the superiority of their own culture. If we look at how the term for "culture" emerged in modern Indian languages, we notice that the most commonly used term, *sanskriti*, is actually a translation of the English word "culture". The point being made here is not that there was no concept of culture before the English introduced it, but that after the 19th century we invest different meanings in culture. It becomes the location of everything that is uniquely ours, and therefore different from anything that can be found in the world of the colonizer. As we become modern Indians, and then go on to become citizens of an independent nation, we hold on to the idea of "our culture" as setting us apart from others.

Although the culture question is an intimate part of the formation of our modern identity, culture in modernity is seen as something that remains the other of that which is modern. This means that in discussions on/descriptions of what is 'modern', culture

provides the contrast case of that which is not-modern, that which is traditional and is outside the processes of westernisation that then come to stand in for modernity. This relationship between culture and modernity, a relationship that has its roots in the colonial context, may give us some indication as to why women occupy such a central place in discussions about culture in the non-West.

There are many similarities between the Indian context and other societies across Asia. Kumari Jayawardena's classic work *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) had argued that in the non-West these two movements – movement for women's rights and the movement for national liberation – share a close relationship. Parallely, the 'culture question' also becomes a 'national culture question', with significant implications for women. Although nationalist movements fighting against the colonizer enable women's political participation, they also create for them a position in national symbolism that is remarkably static. Women come to be increasingly seen as the repositories of 'tradition' and 'culture'.

A criticism routinely faced by feminists across Asia is that they are deracinated or alienated from 'our culture', that feminism comes from the West and therefore represents an alien set of ideas. Interestingly, this is not a charge levelled against any of our other political frameworks (eg. Marxism, liberalism) which may also be far from having any obvious indigenous source. Why then does feminism come under fire for being alien? Feminist demands are allegedly demands arising from 'modernization', which is seen to erase 'our' culture and replace it with western values and ways of life. This criticism is easily and frequently made, but it does not take into account how the notion of culture itself has been put together in our context.

One of our starting points would be to understand (a) how the creation of the national essence was based on the assertion of cultural difference from the West (how ‘we’ are different from ‘them’), and (b) how women were frequently represented as the embodiment of that difference (that it is in women, their bodies and lives, that this difference is displayed). When nationalists in the non-Western world signal a relationship of conflict between modernity and culture, what is being implied is that women are part of that which is cultural and therefore authentic. They cannot therefore be part of the modern, or, as is more common, can only have a highly mediated relationship to modernity. So when women behave in ways associated with modernity (read assertive, individualistic, ambitious...) they are seen as challenging their place in Indian culture and therefore undermining that culture itself. Culture, as we have seen, came to be opposed to ‘modernity’ – if both had to co-exist in colonial India, they had to be gendered female and male respectively. In a context of rapid and far-reaching social changes caused by urbanization and migration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women became the repositories of all that was seen as part of custom and tradition even as men went to work in colonial society and imitated the dress and manners of the English.<sup>2</sup>

The women-and-culture pair thus forms part of a sedimented commonsense in India, and has always been an unresolved issue even in the women’s movement. From time to time, flashpoints remind us of this unresolved problem: one such incident occurred in early 2009.

### **The Pink Chaddi Campaign**

In late January 2009 a newly-formed right-wing Hindu group called the Sri Ram Sene (army of the god Rama) in the coastal town of Mangalore in Karnataka announced that its members would target young couples found together on Valentine's Day. The Ram Sene's leader, Pramod Muthalik, said: "Our activists will go around with a priest, a turmeric stub and a *mangalsutra* on February 14. If we come across couples being together in public and expressing their love, we will take them to the nearest temple and conduct their marriage" (*The Hindu* 2009).<sup>3</sup> Although Valentine's Day in India is largely a celebration generated by greeting-card companies, over the last several years it has attracted widespread attention even in non-metropolitan areas and amongst those who don't speak English. It has also consequently attracted attacks from right-wing political parties who have condemned it as a manifestation of the depravity of Western culture. Following this announcement, Muthalik's men attacked a pub in Mangalore and beat up and drove out the women they found there.<sup>4</sup> This event featured prominently in the electronic and print media across the entire country. In the state of Karnataka, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in power and human rights groups claimed that the party was tacitly condoning the actions of the Sri Ram Sene. The entire coastal area of Karnataka and Mangalore in particular had already for some years become the site for new tensions between Hindus, Christians and Muslims, all of whom for decades have shared cultural and political space in the region.<sup>5</sup>

A few days after the Mangalore pub attack, the Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women was formed on the social networking site Facebook. This consortium launched a campaign to send pink panties to the Sri Ram Sene on Valentine's Day that year. The idiom of this protest was unprecedented in the history of Indian

feminist politics. As one of the key organizers of the campaign wrote: “[W]e were only thinking of a way to render absurd the ever-bigger chaddiwala” (Susan 2009). The chaddiwala referred to is a man who wears the long khaki shorts (*chaddi* in several Indian languages) which are part of the uniform of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers’ Organisation), the parent organization of the group of right-wing parties collectively known as the Sangh Parivar or family of organisations.

Nisha Susan recounts the growth of the campaign: “Within a day of starting the campaign we had 500 odd members. In a week we hit 40,000. From Puerto Rico to Singapore, from Chennai to Ahmedabad, from Guwahati to Amritsar, people wrote to us, how do I send my chaddis? But by then the campaign had gone offline. Elderly men and women, schoolchildren, middle-aged housewives, gravelly-voiced big men from Bihar who did not quite want to say the word chaddi aloud called us” (Susan 2009). Collection centres sprang up across India; people were encouraged to drop off panties at these points to be couriered to the Sri Ram Sene headquarters in Mangalore. While there were offline aspects to this protest, the Pink Chaddi Campaign (PCC) as it came to be known was perhaps the first internet campaign of the women’s movement in India. So much so that when a series of street processions and demonstrations were organized in a few cities, the protesters numbered far fewer than those who usually showed up for rights-violation agitations. Even the March 8<sup>th</sup> International Women’s Day rally held in Bangalore had only about 300 people.

Criticisms of the PCC were many: they came from peer groups who would otherwise have shared in the progressive politics of feminists who called the PCC elitist and frivolous (surely there were far more serious issues to be dealt with in relation to

women); and from Hindutva groups who claimed the PCC was against Hindu culture, disrespectful of Hindu symbolism, and so on. The abusive responses to the protesters also came not just from lower middle class ‘fundamentalists’ but from internet-savvy conservatives attacking ‘secular’ ‘progressives’ and from male university students. The discussions threw up a chain of related concepts: secular, western, modern (and therefore against ‘our culture’) – this chain of association was mobilized with ease against women who find the Ram Sene’s assertions problematic. Most feminist groups have supported the PCC and Valentine’s Day rallies, even those who agitated against the Miss World beauty contest in Bangalore in 1994 or maintained a studied silence on the *Fire* controversy involving Deepa Mehta’s film (these two representing other recent conjunctures of gender-culture-globalization) (Niranjana and John 1999). In fact, people who had never recognized or celebrated Valentine’s Day were seen wearing pink on February 14, 2009.

Mainstream media representations of the protests and counter-protests suggested a class polarization over the issue. In actuality, both online and offline protests indicate that an astonishingly diverse set of people were involved. Some have read the pub attack as an anti-globalization gesture, but this reading does not account for the long history of domestic violence, custodial violence (by the army and the police), and other displays of public hostility towards women in India. Similarly, it would not be correct to see the PCC as an assertion of pro-globalization forces, just as earlier campaigns of the women’s movement cannot simply be dismissed as ‘Western’ inspired.

Another interesting divide seems to exist between the groups of those protesting against the Sri Ram Sene’s attacks. The Valentine’s Day support campaign drew on the

participation of local groups (including Kannada linguistic nationalists, a farmers' movement, and a 'secular' political party led by a former underworld figure), but the same groups did not show up on March 8<sup>th</sup> to celebrate Women's Day. The local groups seemed to support heterosexual lovers' right to freedom of expression (to the extent of sending out patrolling Love Chariots on Valentine's Day to protect lovers against the threatened attacks of the Ram Sene), but was not particularly interested in women's rights as articulated by feminists.

While feminist groups in India have criticized the violence against women evident in the pub attack and in the individual attacks that followed, not many have spoken openly about the PCC. Perhaps there is a discomfort with the idiom of the campaign, which is both sexually coy and aggressive at the same time. Why is the Pink Chaddi a powerful condensation, a range of varied interests converging on one image? The vulgarity of popular culture harnessed to the sophistication of Web 2.0 is one of the means by which this condensation seems to work. It has been relatively simpler for feminists to criticize 'moral policing' when it is associated with inter-caste and inter-religion marriage or relationships; and harder when it is seen as relating more explicitly to sexuality, as in Valentine's Day or lovers in parks engaging in PDA (public display of affection - a new term in the youth lexicon).

Some feminists bloggers have felt that the PCC protest has not been productive. You sent chaddis, they sent pink saris. What has been achieved? They ask. This comment does not seem to take into account the fact that the PCC has now entered the popular vocabulary, showing up in advertisements and general journalistic articles alike. While there was a certain cohesiveness to the 'victim group' in this instance of the pub attacks

(the women being mostly young, urban and middle class) which may allow some to dismiss the protest as elitist, the PCC may well mark a shift in the language of feminist politics in India, where the comfort of 'speaking for' underprivileged women that the movement has always had is being challenged, and the question of representation itself is being interrogated. If feminists don't recognize the unprecedented nature of the PCC, they will not be able to see how it is crucially situated at the intersection of questions of sexuality and female desire with the worlds of contemporary politics in India. The PCC took on board the sexual sub-text of the Hindutva pub attack and of the masculinist rhetoric of its perpetrators, and 'outed' it through a public display; it did so not by criticizing and therefore drawing attention to that sub-text but by embedding it in the symbolism of the campaign.

The interest in theorizing sexuality has cut across different regions in the non-western world, perhaps since sexuality has for some time now been a limit case for feminism – the most ambiguous area of conceptual and political engagement, whether it is in relation to how power gets distributed in heterosexual relationships, or in relation to the striving for coherent gendered behaviour even in alternatively sexual relationships. For the translation/vocabulary question, sexuality is a key area for the playing out of arguments over cultural difference, just as it is central to thinking about questions relating to modernity. In more ways than one, the PCC which brought together in one arresting and sexualized image the issues of translation, of modernity, of culture and of the political is a challenge to those of us interested in reshaping both the language of feminism as well its objectives and strategies.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The landmark anthology *Recasting Women* (Sangari and Vaid 1989) has several incisive articles elaborating this history.

<sup>2</sup> For an influential account of this shift and of the emergence of a new sense of public and private spheres, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993).

<sup>3</sup> The *mangalsutra* is a Hindu symbol of marriage worn around the neck by a wife; the turmeric stub is used to make auspicious marks.

<sup>4</sup> Here is a short list of URLs which offer some visual references:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lEbD2aXs-XU> (pub attack);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnbYYwOvAFo&feature=related> (campaign steps);

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THITp1E\\_onU&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THITp1E_onU&feature=related) (pile of pink chaddis);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pgrk9YG6Nq0&feature=related> (debate on NDTV);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EQ7NS6jeIU&feature=related> (latest weapon in culture clashes).

<sup>5</sup> For a succinct introduction to the complex politics of the region, see the unpublished piece by Sumi Krishna (2009).

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