Why Kali Won't Rage: A Critique of Indian Feminism.

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Abstract:

Two unique factors distinguish Indian feminism from the feminism in the west. One, it rejects the notion of a deep-rooted, tradition-fed, gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men. Secondly – it does not ascribe the abysmal state of women in India to longstanding patriarchal oppression, and hence sees no reason to rage against it. While to western feminists, these factors might seem oddly perplexing, there is within Indian feminism a rationalization of these outlooks. Their argument is that what may seem to be a gender hierarchy to westerners, is simply regarded as cultural observances by Indians. They further argue that because of the tradition of goddess worship, Indian men are more attuned to the idea of women in power, and that unlike the west, in India, men too have historically participated in the women's rights movement. This paper argues that the ground reality of the state of women in India today, or indeed even historically, does not support this perspective. It also asks the question why this perspective might have evolved in the Indian women's movement, and takes a historical, sociological and psychological view of possible explanations. Finally, the paper asserts that the Indian feminist movement has a responsibility to gravely introspect on its position and approach so far, and urgently contemplate a new approach and plan of action on challenging India into becoming a more gender-just and humane nation. It also makes a few suggestions on some of the issues that specifically need to be focused on.

1 Two unique factors distinguish Indian feminism from the feminism in the west. One, it rejects the notion of a deep-rooted, tradition-fed gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men. Secondly – it does not ascribe the abysmal state of women in India to longstanding patriarchal oppression, and hence sees no reason to rage against it. While to western feminists, these factors might seem oddly perplexing, there is within Indian feminism a rationalization of these outlooks.

2 Suma Chitnis in *Feminism In India*, a compilation of "some of the most influential writings on the concept of feminism in India" (Chaudhuri 1), describes how once, while attending an international seminar on gender roles in Canada, she was acutely conscious of the fact that while the western feminists there launched an "angry tirade" against the patriarchies in their countries, she felt no such anger towards the patriarchy in her own country. She goes on to elaborate on Indian women's general "disapproval of [the western] feminist anger" and their "confused reaction to the [western] feminist emphasis on patriarchy […] particularly on men as the principal oppressors" (Chitnis 8-10).

3 Chitnis muses that this might be because history and culture render, "the women's issues different in India from the issues in the west." She points out that historically India has "always been [a] highly hierarchical [society]" with the hierarchies maintained through

customs and social behavioral codes. She also notes that unlike the west where individuality and personal freedom are emphasized, Indians cherish values like submission to superiors, "self-denial" and "sublimating the [individual] ego." In other words, Indian society is sociologically and psychologically acclimatized to the notion of a stratified social order, and what may appear as gender hierarchy to an outsider, is simply regarded as cultural observances by Indians. Also, what westerners may read as a forfeiting of the individual self is regarded by Indian women as a prioritizing of family and community over the individual. Hence they see it as making a choice in favor of the larger good.

4 Chitnis further justifies this perspective of Indian feminism by arguing that after Independence the Indian constitution "granted women political status fully equal to that of men. [And] thus Indian women did not have to bear the kind of injustices that women in the West had to suffer because of the […] gap between political ideals and realities." She contends that since Independence in 1947, the Indian government has through its series of Five Year Plans provided for the "welfare of women" such that if countries are compared in terms of legal provisions for women, India "is likely to emerge as one of the most progressive countries." Chitnis feels this is one of the main reasons why Indian women are not as agitated as their western counterparts. She concludes that Indian women "see that the legal safeguards and equal opportunity facilities that are being fought for [by western feminists] […] are already available to them in principle" (Chitnis 9, 11, 17).

5 Madhu Kishwar, in the same compilation of essays, *Feminism in India*, corroborates Chitnis' viewpoint and further adds that "the idea of women's rights and dignity […] [has] a much longer history of individual women's assertiveness in India [than in the west.]" This she believes is evidenced in India's traditions of goddess worship, where "*Shakti*" or power is recognized as an embodiment of the feminine. Kishwar insists that this in fact "allows Indian society to be far more receptive to women's assertions and strengths" then western societies are. This, she argues, is also the reason why, unlike the west, in India, men too have historically participated in the women's rights movement. She points out that during the British Colonial period men even took a leadership role in the abolishment of practices like *sati*, and the institution of laws to allow widows to remarry. Kishwar's contention is that because of the tradition of goddess worship, Indian men are socially adjusted to the idea of women in positions of power and that this is one of main reasons why the women's movement in India "did not acquire the overtones of gender warfare as it did in the West where women faced fierce hostility from most politically active men in their endeavours to win equality" (35-36).

6 However, notwithstanding laws, the constitution, goddess worship and male feminists, the ground reality of women in India today is an outrage. While India has undergone astronomical growth in industry and wealth, and is now geared to become the third largest economy in the world (Sinha, P.), the state of Indian women, when taken as a national stratum that theoretically represents one half of the nation, has been horrendously regressive.

7 In 2010, the World Economic Forum released its Global Gender Gap report, in which India ranked at 112 out of a total of 134 countries (Murti). The report measured the difference in how men and women in each country had access to resources and opportunities. It took into consideration economics, education, political participation, health and survival. When countries are ranked according to economic participation and job opportunities for women, India ranks at 128, above just six other countries. Even in India's booming corporate sector, the country's highly educated and professional stratum, the average annual income of women is U.S. $1,185, less than a third of the average annual income for men at U.S. $3,698 (Nagrajan). Even among the BRICS nations – Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa and India – the five developing countries that have the fastest growing economies in the world, India lags far behind the others in view of how much of this growth is inclusive of women (Rajadhyaksha). Women occupy only 11% of political offices in India, compared to 21% in China. India also has one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world and in 2006 the World Bank estimated that more than 50% of India's females above the age of 15 are illiterate (Business Standard). However, even this figure is misleading, since "measuring effective literacy in India means including anyone who can read and write his or her own name, [so if] […] Sita knows how to read and write the four letters of her name [she is counted] […] in the category of effective literates" (Bhaskar). Almost 50% of girls in India are married off by their families before the age of 18, and India singularly also accounts for one-third of the world's child brides (Sinha K., UNGA).

8 What is now amply evident is that this existential disparity faced by India's women is fueled by an unrestrained misogyny. A misogyny that not only does not permit women an equal life-style but one that does not even permit them the most fundamental of all human rights -- the right to live. A 2011 global poll by Thomson Reuters Foundation identifies India as the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women (Chowdhury).

9 In three generations, India has systematically targeted and annihilated more than 50 million women from its population – a number which constitutes the sum total of the populations of Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Portugal put together (Banerji,

Female Genocide). In 20 years India will have methodically annihilated 20% of women from its population (Sinha K., In 20 Years). They have been eliminated through the rampant practices of female feticide, female infanticide, killing of girls under 5 years through intentional neglect, dowry murders, “honor” killings, and endangerment of women through multiple and forced female fetal abortions. Between 500,000 to 700,000 girls go “missing” in India every year, eliminated through female feticide and female infanticide. The average life expectancy of Indian women at 66 years is one of the lowest in the world. India has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, and one out of every 140 women in India is at risk of dying due to pregnancy or childbirth (Sinha K., India Slips). The crime of dowry related murders of young married women in India has escalated to epidemic levels. Many of these murders are staged as kitchen accidents or suicides by self-immolation. A study published in the *Lancet* in 2009 (Sanghavi), that collated hospital records and testimonies, estimated that as many as 136000 women are being killed by fire in India each year, that is one woman is killed every five minutes (Stephey).

10 This signifies a misogyny that does not even spare infants and girls. A 2007 UNICEF report shows that the mortality rate of girls under 5 years was abnormally high, about 40% higher than boys the same age, and this was due to intentional neglect, a malicious denial of food and medication, that is tantamount to negligent homicide (UNICEF 12). A 2011 study by the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Harvard School of Public Health showed that girls under 5 years were 21% more likely than boys that age, and infant girls one-year or younger were 50% more likely to die than infant boys that age, because of violence inflicted on them at home. They estimated that in the last two decades more than 1800,000 girls under the age of 6 years have been killed by domestic violence. The head researcher Jay Silverman said, "Being born a girl into a family in India in which your mother is abused makes it significantly less likely that you will survive early childhood. Shockingly, this violence does not pose a threat to your life if you are lucky enough to be born a boy" (Sinha K., Violence at Home).

11 The fallout of this misogynistic annihilation results in a further commoditization of women. Domestic trafficking accounts for the largest percentage of sex trafficking of women in India today (Dixit). Women are kidnapped or sometimes sold by their own families through touts in regions where gender ratios are so low that families are willing to “buy” brides (Sharma). Most of these bought brides are virtual slaves, used not only to serve the domestic, sexual and reproductive requirements of the family, but are often sexually exploited by other men in the family too. Once they’ve had children and have been used,

many of these women are re-sold into the bride market as second hand ‘goods.’ Known as *Paros*, these women can be bought, sold and resold up to three or four times, their value estimated according to their age, reproductive capacity, and how many times before they’ve already been “married” (Agal).

12 While Indian women see no cause for outrage despite their brutal subjugation and dehumanization, the men in India have gone on the offensive against what they see as their outright persecution by Indian women. They have formed an influential and effective lobby to mitigate one of the most critical domestic violence laws in India – the 498A . Their claim is that women are rampantly filing false cases of domestic abuse and harassment, and that men are the “victims of gender-biased laws” . Even if there were such cases, the problem clearly is in the implementation of the law, and in the failure of the police and the courts to efficiently investigate and file the legitimate complaints brought forth. Yet, the anti-498A lobby was so focused and powerful in its networking and campaigning that it was able to effectively have its case presented for hearing before the Indian Parliament.

13 The resistance to the anti-498A lobby from women’s groups was erratic, weak and ineffective. In fact, even the President of India, a woman, and a lawyer at that, seemed to agree that men are justified in their complaints of being abused by women who were misusing the law to persecute them. In an interview she said, that domestic violence laws like the 498a were “subjected to distortion and misuse to wreak petty vengeance and to settle scores” (Ram). The Supreme Court of India on its part has urged the government of India to mitigate the 498A, arguing that the courts “come across a large number of such complaints which are not even bona fide and are filed with oblique motives [and that for the court] […] to find out the truth is a Herculean task in a majority of these complaints […] Criminal trials lead to immense suffering […] [and] even ultimate acquittal in the trial may not be able to wipe out the deep scars of ignominy [from accused husbands and their families]” (The Times of India, Amend Dowry Law). In a country where life and survival has become a fundamental issue for women, where dowry related violence and murders have risen at such monstrous rates they’ve assumed the appearance of an epidemic, how does a law for the protection of women come under the scanner and not provoke a furious and outright revolt among women’s groups?

14 One of the most obvious reasons for the passivity of Indian women in the face of such extreme tyranny is that this is a socially and culturally conditioned response. Since gender is effectively a cultural construct, it is customary for girls and women to assume a code of behavior and response that is typified for people of their gender in their own communities

(Crawford 22-23). The ancient, religious text of India, *The Laws of Manu*, provides the prototype for the ideal Indian woman:

> A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in her own house. In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence. A woman should not try to separate herself from her father, her husband, or her sons, for her separation from them would make both her own and her husband's families contemptible. She should always be cheerful, and clever at household affairs; she should keep her utensils well polished and not have too free a hand in spending. When her father, or her brother with her father's permission, gives her to someone [in marriage], she should obey that man while he is alive and not violate her vow to him [even] when he is dead. A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities […] It is because a wife obeys her husband that she is exalted in heaven (Doniger 115).

15 Docility is still the most exalted personality trait in Indian women, and a much sought after attribute in prospective brides in the matrimonial columns of Indian newspapers. Even when the prospective bride is a career woman she is expected to "also" be "domestic" – a word that implies compliancy. One of the primary reasons why families resist educating girls and are keen to marry their daughters off at a younger age, is that the younger and less-educated she is, the more she is regarded as being tame and easy to control. Hence these are the brides preferred by the husbands and in-laws.

16 The above passage from *The Laws of Manu* also proves what theories of personality development indicate -- that built into expectant gender roles are the social valuations of the gender, that is, how inferior or superior a gender is ranked in a culture. In fact Indian religious texts expound on the inferiority of women extensively. According to Hindu creation theory, women were created from the lowest and most impure part of the body – the feet. Various texts describe women as "lustful, lazy, power hungry, deceitful, malicious and vengeful by nature […] [and] men are advised to keep guard on women at all times or they would bring great distress to the family […]" (Banerji, Sex and Power, 104-5). And as Indian women internalize their culturally defined gender roles, the tendency is to also internalize an inferior valuation of themselves. Traits such as passivity, susceptibility, avoidance of confrontation and absence of motivation for change, are often indications that women have internalized their social devaluation and subordination (Crawford 22-23). Indeed when the external oppression becomes highly internalized, victims "begin to actually believe […] that [their oppression] doesn't even exist" (Yamato 58), a form of denial that's very apparent in Indian women. Other symptoms of "internalized subordination," include a lack of a sense of

personal rights and entitlements, low expectations and a willingness to compromise oneself (Aspy 23). These are evident in Indian womens' rationalizations about the virtue of their culture-driven obligation to forgo the personal self for the sake of the family and community. Ela Bhatt, one on India's most lauded women's activists, on Women's Day recently questioned, "Why should women consider maternity, motherhood and household work as a burden? That is our privilege, a source of power […]" (Bhatt, Interview). What Bhatt, as most Indian feminists, shies away from is the question of individual choice for women that the culture strangles. It is not the role itself, be it motherhood or domestic work, which is a burden per se. Rather the burden, indeed the oppression, is when the culturally ordained role becomes an imposition that violates women's individual rights of choice, physical safety, mental well-being and human dignity.

17 Indeed, in cultures, like that of India, where there is excessive emphasis on observing religious and traditional norms, internalized oppression is even harder to shake off since there is an impulsive adherence to stipulated social behavior and gender roles that is resistant to rational examination and change (Aspy 76). Indeed Indian women's refusal to rage itself is an indicator of internalized subordination. Studies of human social behavior show that anger as an emotion is usually permitted to groups only in the upper rungs of society, since it indicates social power (Tidens), as indeed the anti-498A men's lobby demonstrates. On the other hand, the appropriate emotions allowed for the subordinate groups are sadness and remorse. These, not surprisingly, are the most often expressed emotions by Indian women in the context of their dismal state.

18 The Indian women's refusal to rage, besides being a culturally instilled response and a symptom of internalized subordination, might also be a historically adopted strategy of surviving an aggressive patriarchy. Submissiveness often is a strategy for survival in the face of the most extreme forms of violence, ones that directly threaten survival. Here passivity becomes a learned response. Victims learn to become passive when they are repeatedly made powerless through the infliction of violence, or their resistance is violently crushed if and when they try to raise objections or resist their oppressors (Jones 181). There are other indicators for this in the response of Indian women to traditional patriarchy. These responses are symptomatic of Battered Women's Syndrome, and the question that needs to be examined is, are these also evident at a collective level and in the women's movement in India? One of these symptoms is the inclination to romanticize existent gender dynamics, while the other is a tendency to self-blame (Follingstand).

19 Women's rights activists in India often deny the power play of a violent patriarchy in India, and go to great lengths to expound on, indeed romanticize, how Indian men have historically fought for women's rights in India. However many of the issues that individual male activists had campaigned against during the British colonial period, such as *sati*, the burning alive of a widow on her husband's pyre, were not so much a woman's right issue as a human rights one. The equivalent, for example, would be the fight against witch burning in the United States. Furthermore, the presence of a few social male activists is not representative of how Indian men in general felt about or responded to the repressive, often inhuman customs targeted at women. During the British colonial period, there was tremendous resentment among the Indian men to the attempts to encourage education of girls and women in their communities. Men felt their conventional positions of power threatened by educated women, and contended that education ruined Indian women by stripping them of traditional values and westernizing them, such that they neglected to satisfactorily fulfill their domestic duties. The political and economic autonomy of women was an idea that was unpalatable to even some of the most prominent social and political figures of this time like Gandhi, who also maintained that women's rightful place was the home, and that their strength was in working to serve the family and community (Banerji, Sex and Power, 250-52).

20 Indeed many Indian women writers from this period, like Mokshodayani Mukhopadhyay and Tarabai Shinde, challenged the real motive of many of their contemporary Indian men activists (Tharu 217-18). They felt that the attempts by these men for the "improvement" of women, were more like benevolent dole outs to passive recipients rather than a serious commitment to socially fostering the independence and empowerment of women. More so, there were in fact occasions when Indian men mass protested against administrative attempts to abolish violent practices against girls and women, as was the case with the issue of child marriage (Banerji, Sex and Power, 247-8). When in 1890, a girl less than 10-years-old was married to an older man and died of hemorrhaging after he raped her, the British tried to introduce 12 years as a minimum age of consent for girls. It caused a public uproar and men mobilized against the law in mass protests on the streets. They argued that this was their right by tradition, since Hindu scriptures entitled a 24-year-old man to have an 8-year-old bride, and that Muslim men were similarly entitled since Muhammed himself had a 9-year-old bride. This organized protest was also politically supported by the Indian National Congress party, the current ruling party, which at that time was at the helm of

India's Independence movement. The British administration then, under extreme public and political pressure, decided not to enforce the law.

21 Self-blame is another very frequent response to oppression among Indian women, indeed even women activists. Chitnis for e.g. makes a point that is frequently put forth in India, that it is not men, but women who most often inflict violence on other women. She argues that, "in many incidents of bride-burning, or suicide attempts by women unable to bear ill-treatment […] [the perpetrator of abuse] is almost always one of her female relatives [such as a mother-in-law or sister-in-law.]" Indian men on the other hand, she points out, "have [been] 'benefactors' facilitating the advance of women" (22). Even for those women who have been successful in getting an education, in joining politics and establishing a career in a chosen profession, Chitnis asserts they too "have almost invariably been encouraged, supported and actively helped by a husband, a father or a brother" (23).

22 So what then explains the pathetic state of women in India? In Chitnis's opinion, it is their own "failure." She points out this "failure" of women at different levels – "failure to exercise their rights […] and failure to use legal safeguards." She explains that "the problem really lies in the fact that women do not make proper use of the existing legal and political rights [available to them] […] Even educated women are apathetic, [and so] political parties consider women candidates a poor risk and are unwilling to invest in them" (18-19). The line of reasoning here is that the state of women in India is pitiable, not because of oppression by men, but because women do it to themselves. They are incompetent and self-destructive. The questions that are never asked or examined are: What really happens when women approach the system for their legal rights? Why are women turning on women? And what is it that ultimately brings or keeps women in positions of political power in India?

23 There are, indeed, umpteen laws and authorized provisions for women in India, as is often pointed out. But the reason most women don't avail of them is because far from being a source of protection and empowerment, they find the legal and criminal system makes them even more vulnerable to abuse. The manner in which these laws are overtly disregarded or flouted by the very agencies meant to uphold them, like the police and judiciary, reinforces the message of the autocratic power and ruthlessness of a patriarchal system. A majority of rape cases in India are never even filed with the police. The general fear, particularly among the women of the lower economic strata, is not just that the police will disregard their complaints, but that they might see it as motive for rape. There have been numerous cases of women being raped by the police, when they went in to file a rape charge (The Times of India, Girl Who Accused). In 2005, in the vastly publicized rape case of Imrana, a woman

who was clearly desperate for help when she publicly accused her father-in-law of raping her, the Indian legal system didn't just fail her, but refused to intervene promptly, and watched on as Imrana herself was put on public trial by an Islamic village council. The council declared Imrana "polluted" and ordered her to divorce her husband and marry her father-in-law, while the village ostracized her. Incidentally, one of the first things Imrana had said when she made her complaint was how rampant this issue of sexual abuse of young women was by various men in their families. In the manner in which Imrana was re-victimized by the system, what are the chances other women would now come forth with their complaints?

24 It is also worth noting that the Indian state with the highest incidents of rapes of women (NDTV), which also factors some of the worst national figures in terms of female literacy, female feticide, female infanticide, and dowry violence, is headed by Mayawati, a female Chief Minister, who also happens to be a *dalit*, a community comprised of the lowest and most oppressed castes in India. In the course of her political stewardship so far, she has shown much effort in catering to the demands of *dalit* men, as well as upper caste men. She has however, shown no interest in even addressing the issues oppressing women, let alone a resolve to provide a safer and more gender-just governance for the women in her state. What female politicians in India understand well, is that they may be women, but their position and power is dependent only on their ability to acknowledge and serve the dominion of the patriarchy. Indeed, no female politician in India could ever hope to come to power by announcing gender-equality as her political agenda.

25 The frequency with which women turn on women in India, where mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law participate in the group abuse and dowry murders of married women, is probably one the most glaring signs of a despotic and dangerous patriarchy. Giuliana Tedeschi, a holocaust survivor, in an autobiographical account, described her experience in the women's camp at Birkenau. She talks about what happens when women find themselves prisoners of a desperate situation, where their very survival becomes a source of competition among them. "Exasperated, the mass of bodies became bestial or mad and in this hell conflicts of race, class, and character exploded violently. Even prison friends…had moments when they were overcome by bestiality […]" (201).

26 An important question to ask is, are there indications in Indian history of situations where women have tried to resist or revolt against their general oppression and have been brutally subdued by men? Is the passive response of India's modern feminist movement to the systematic repression, indeed annihilation, of women in India, a historically learned response?

27 A close study of the *Shakta* cults that arose in the first millennium A.D. in India, reveals "the seeds of a feminist rebellion" (Banerji, Sex and Power, 157). The *Shakta* cults were goddess worshipping cults, that regarded the goddess as "*Shakti*" – power personified as female. Unlike the earlier cults that arose from the Vedic traditions and venerated male gods, with the goddesses serving simply as reproductive consorts to them, the *Shaktas* regarded the goddess as having absolute and sole command over the universe, with powers that surpassed that of the all male gods combined. It was believed that her supremacy was incontestable, and so powerful was she in her ability to create, sustain and destroy, that she could render the mighty male gods like Brahma and Shiva dispensable. The *Shakta* philosophies and myths in essence "revolutionized the concept of the feminine in India [as they] seemed to rebuff the bovine placidity of the [earlier] Vedic goddess." The *Shakta* goddesses were immodest, and assertive in their needs and demands, in all arenas, including sex. As in the myths of Radha and Sati, the goddess broke social conventions of marriage, caste and clan in her choice of sexual partners. And when confronted with men who wanted to sexually exploit her, the goddess would, as Durga or Kali, respond to the affront with fearsome rage and spectacular battle skills – destroying the men in a bloody battle and then wearing their decapitated heads in a victory garland around her neck. Some of the literature and myths from this period indicate that there could possibly have been an open altercation between older male-worshipping cults and the goddess worshipping ones. For instance, temples dedicated to male gods would often create symbolic "barriers" to prevent *Shakta* goddesses like Kali from entering the premise as they were regarded as evil and destructive forces (Banerji, Sex and Power, 156-65).

28 Some scholars have suggested that the *Shakta* cults might actually have been associated with matriarchal communities, and that around the early 2nd millennium AD there might have ensued a violent confrontation between matriarchal and patriarchal communities, because of their conflicting ideologies, that resulted in a brutal overpowering of the matriarchal tribes which is reflected in an extraordinary increase in the practices of hypergamy, child marriages and *sati* as observed in this period (Bhattacharya 119).

29 We could probably add to this list female infanticide as well. Not only is there a religious sanction of this practice in the Vedas – the scriptures of the highly patriarchal Vedic communities that dates back to the first millennium B.C., but as some of the earliest official census records in the late nineteenth century, under the Colonial British government, show that the systematic practice of femicide in India had already resulted in a highly skewed gender ratio. The 1901 census shows that 3.1 million women had already been exterminated

from the population, a phenomenon that horrified the British administration as they had not known of any such practice by communities in other parts of the world (Banerji, Sex and Power, 287, 307).

30 However, the British colonial period particularly in the late nineteenth and early twenties century, shows another interesting pattern of gender dynamics in India. First of all, encouraged by the vigor of the women's suffrage movement in England, several women's organizations, such as the *Women's Indian Association*, *Sakhi Samiti*, and the *All India Muslim Ladies Conference* emerged all over India. This rising voice of women in India was not only challenging the oppressive traditions against women (such as *sati*), and demanding fundamental rights such as the right to education and property, but they were also pushing for their right to equal participation in the public sphere – such as in the right to vote, to join politics, and the right to work. But what was particularly unprecedented in this period was the number of autobiographical books published by Indian women. In these books women freely vented their opinions and feelings and described how as housewives they were literally treated like slaves and made to serve the demands of large extended families, how it affected their health and well-being, their brutal experiences as widows, their suffocation by traditions that prohibited them from going outside the house, or meeting people, or traveling, or even getting an education or a job. Women writers from this period were openly critical of traditions that crushed Indian women. Pandita Ramabai called the practice of segregating women in special quarters as "shameful" and a terrible "cruelty." Krupabai Satthianadhan was critical of how Indians raised their daughters like "inferior" beings. Vibhavari Shirurkar talked about how it was Indian men's egos that sexually violated and repressed women. There is "an unmistakable fury in the writings of many women" in this period, a fury that is not contained, that does not cringe from openly confronting the Indian male patriarchy, and emerges in fearless and explicit expressions (Banerji, Sex and Power, 252-265).

31 Indeed, what is particularly curious is how this voice and fury of Indian women fell silent soon after India's independence. Indeed, despite the escalating violence against women in India today, with practices like dowry murders, honor killings, and bride trafficking, there are hardly any autobiographical accounts by Indian women about their lives and experiences. Dowry violence and forced female fetal abortions are highly prevalent among the middle and upper classes of women who are educated and often working, yet even among them there is no voice emerging. It should be noted that many of the women who spoke out during the British colonial times were not highly educated or economically independent. More so, the increasing tendency in the women's movement in post-independent India has been to be

accommodating of customs and traditions, and to refuse to name and directly confront the power structure of a traditional gender hierarchy. It puts the modern feminist movement in India in almost a regressive position when compared to the women's movement during the colonial period. Why is this so? One possible explanation could be that the presence of the British colonial government, and their direct apprehension of many of the customs that were oppressive of girls and women, through laws, provided a safe niche, probably a breathing space for women, which allowed them to confront the brutal power and dominance the traditional patriarchy had had over Indian women. And once the British left the country, the Indian patriarchy, having been restrained for so long, reasserted itself with increasing vengeance, forcing women to adopt the survivors response, one that is passive and non-confrontational.

32 The feminist movement in India, as elsewhere, is that which leads the national momentum for change for the women of the country. Given the outrageous state of women in India today, the feminist movement has a responsibility to carefully examine its position and approach so far, and urgently contemplate a new approach and plan of action on challenging India into becoming a more gender-just and humane nation. Below are some suggestions for what the Indian feminist and women's movement need to focus on:

1. Recognize and name the reality

   When Indian feminists speak about the state of womens' affairs in India, they rarely look the ground reality in the eye or identify it clearly. It is often swept under the carpet as something symptomatic and representative of the general state of affairs of women world-wide. However a majority of women in countries around the world, do not face the horrific prospect of mass femicide (Banerji, Female Genocide) or of having 20% of them being targeted and selectively annihilated. The first step to overcoming violence that many battered women learn, is to overcome denial; to clearly recognize and identify the violence being inflicted on them as criminal, and to hold the perpetrator accountable. This is also what the women's movement in India must do collectively.

2. Realize that the domestic must become public

   Despite the undue emphasis on family and tradition in India by the feminist movement, these issues are not unique to India. These were the hurdles for the feminist movement in western countries as well. The male-dominated social and legal systems in the west, that persistently turned a blind eye to violence on women in their homes, had also regarded family traditions and cohesiveness as a national priority. In the U.S. the public attitudes to domestic violence began to change only in the 1970s' when the feminist movement made a collective and concerted effort to name "the hidden and private violence in women's lives—declare it public—and treat both violence and killing as a crime" (Jones 6-11). Recently, when American singer

Rihanna was assaulted by her boyfriend, it caused a public uproar in the U.S., something that would have been unheard of even 30 years ago.

3. Actively redefine gender roles and rights independently of culture

   India's feminist movement needs to clearly recognize that the gender roles defined by Indian culture and traditions both perpetuate Indian women's internalization of their social oppression, as well as give leeway to men to exercise their tyranny on them. Interviews with battered women show that the one crucial characteristic that most of these women shared was their tendency to accept traditional gender roles (Avni). Studies show that gender scripts, roles, and attitude to violence on women, are learnt primarily through observations of other people's behaviors – at home, in school, in religious institutions. It is where young girls and boys also learn about social boundaries, of what kind of behaviors will be tolerated, and what they cannot get away with (Crowell 58). To escape these "gender prisons" it is imperative that women learn to decline traditional gender roles and reclaim their right to independently define themselves and their goals, without the obligation to justify them to a larger community or social order (Aspy 96).

4. Confront the legal and social tyranny

   When girls and women violate gender status norms, they are stigmatized and face social rejection (Kite). Often, in India the community and society at large treats them as "deviant" and punishes them, frequently resorting to violence as a method of control (Aspy 21, 79). This is a form of social tyranny that the Indian feminist movement must confront and contain, by communicating directly and forcefully with the public about legal rights and transgressions. Studies show that the difference in the degree of gender based discrimination, repression and violence that exists in different societies is determined by what is socially permissible in each society (Crowell 58, 62). The excessive violence and acute oppression of women in India exists because there is a cultural and social sanction for it. Indian feminists must use aggressive public and media propaganda to create a social and psychological environment of acceptability, support and esteem for those who do violate gender norms. The few attempts to engage with the public on gender issues have been indirect and suggestive, like "Save the girl child." Studies show that messages that are upfront and explicit, that do not shy away from stating to the public what is unacceptable about gender based beliefs or practices, are far more effective and impactful (Norris). So a more appropriate public message would be: "Killing your girl child is a crime." "If you kill your girl child you will go to jail." Equally important is the necessity for the feminist movement to demand full accountability from the criminal and legal systems on their utter failure to implement laws or to safeguard women in India, and compel them to fulfill their roles.

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