

# INDIANNES, HINDU NATIONALISM AND AUTHENTICITY: UNITED FORWARD WOMEN, CAPABLE INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Hindutva is currently hijacking the heterogeneous notion of Indianness, and reducing it to a very simplistic and radical entity, always viewed through the lens of its own radical ideology. In that sense, the women's movement has been manipulated by those guards of tradition and authenticity. In order to prove that the women's movement in India has a long and rich history, an overview of those women who rebel against their prescribed gender role as well as an analysis of current Feminism in India are offered.

KEYWORDS: Women Movements in India, Indian Identity Problematicized, Historical Overview

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina como el Hindutva está atacando actualmente la noción heterogénea de la identidad india, reduciéndola a una entidad simplista y radical, vista siempre bajo la lente de su propia ideología radicalizada. En este sentido, el movimiento de mujeres ha sido manipulado por estos guardianes de la tradición y de la autenticidad. Para probar que el movimiento de mujeres en La India cuenta con una historia rica y longeva, se ofrecen tanto una perspectiva de esas mujeres que se rebelaron contra el rol prescrito para su género, así como un análisis del movimiento Feminista contemporáneo en La India.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Movimientos de mujeres en la India, problematización de la identidad india, perspectiva histórica

## 1. INTRODUCTION: AND AIN'T I AN INDIAN

The discussion on Indianness is a recurrent topic in a variety of fora in India. Almost everyday, one can often hear or read somebody arguing that a certain group of Indians is disobedient, antagonistic and has little respect for the Indian culture, tradition as well as social values. Poet Arundhati Subramanian states in the secularist newspaper *The Hindu* that



To uncritically applaud the country's nuclear muscle seems to be one way of being Indian. To metamorphose from miniskirts to saris seems to be the popular media's strategy of shedding Western contamination. Local political parties believe Indianness can be acquired by banning Valentine's Day and renaming the Prince of Wales Museum, the 'Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya,' and later on she continues arguing that "there are the local 'back to our roots' obscurantists who want classical dancers and musicians to be emissaries of a 'pure untainted' Indian culture. (n.p.)

Well known incidents such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat carnage in 2002 have made Indians place emphasis on secularism again. Secularism in the political, as opposed to ecclesiastical sense, requires the separation of the state from any particular religious order. Then, how could we explain the changes in the history textbooks by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to the extreme that two eminent historians –Panicker and Sarkar– had their volume on the freedom struggle called back from the press, or the Sangh Parivar organizing campaigns against Deepa Mehta's film on Varanasi widows, *Water*, so that the shooting was aborted? To remember a few other cases, Maqbool Fida Hussain's painting on goddess Saraswati nude provoked a scandal, so that his paintings and photographs were excluded in 2008 from the Indian Art Summit; and till recently, the anti-Christian violence in Orissa perpetuated by a Hindu fundamentalist organization (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) has already killed many innocent people for fear of conversions and emancipation of Tribals and Dalits.

The main responsible for this surge of Indianness related to the idea of nationalism is Hindutva (a movement which advocates for Hindu nationalism), being its stated objective to instil national pride in every Indian with the motto "United Hindus, capable India." Its final goal is to make India a Hindu nation and prove that Hindus are Vedic Aryans. The principal representative political party that sustains the ideology of Hindu nationalism is the right-wing BJP, in power from 1998 to 2004, and a strong opposition (Varshney Ashutosh 231) till it won the general elections of 2014.

There are those who believe Indian culture must draw on traditional indigenous idioms if it is to be meaningful and anchored, and most importantly, if it is to be authentically Indian. In that sense, the women's movement has been manipulated by those guards of tradition and authenticity. In our current times, there are many outspoken intellectual voices who have had the courage and commitment to critique Hindutva ideology. However, the majority of those who do not convey to the norm of displaying a classical idea of Indianness suffer from invisibility or black mail. For

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<sup>1</sup> Ironic mixture of Hindutva's motto "United Hindus, capable India" and the women's campaign "A Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women" against moral policing by religious conservatives in India.

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example, some of these authors make a huge effort to be published, and when they find a space, they are barely reviewed.

In my interview with feminist publisher Ritu Menon, she stated that there are many kinds of censorship in India; little formal censorship but a lot of other informal and perverse censorship which is related to economy, society, political parties, culture, self-censorship, the censorship of the market, the censorship of institutions, including educational institutions, and street censorship. These are people who form in the street (of course they have an organized backing) and psychically violate or disrupt or make impossible for freedom of expression to exist (Navarro 104). Githa Hariharan deals with this issue in her novel *In Times of Siege*, in which the protagonist, a History professor in New Delhi, has to deal with Hindu fundamentalists after his writing of a lesson on a 12<sup>th</sup> century poet and social reformer, and that attracts the unexpectedly violent attention of a Hindu fundamentalist group, who demands that the lesson be withdrawn from the curriculum. The Munch hires goondas to storm the university and wreck the professor's office. He refuses to apologise, arguing for a plural interpretation of history but the University authorities succumb to blackmail from the fundamentalists' side.

I believe this kind of Hindutva ideology is significant to understand the Indian women's movement, and more specifically, the question of Indianness from the stay-at-home intellectuals' perspective. Contemporary Indian feminists are victims of a prejudice, vis-à-vis their regional counterparts. Since proficiency in English is available only to people of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, a frequent judgement is made that the activists, and their works, belong to a high social strata, and are cut off from the reality of Indian existence. Regarding women's writing, it has been much criticized that the depiction of the psychological suffering of the frustrated Brahmin housewife is a superficial subject matter compared to the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes that we find in regional authors writing in vernacular languages like Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, etc. There is the nativist literary bastion, which believes that the whole question of English is a colonial hangover and consequently not Indian enough. However, numerous writers such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, agree with the fact that authors practising in English do not need to write about poverty and tsunamis or Himalayan yogis to prove that they are genuine Indian or sound like authentic Indian.

As a consequence, what happens in India is that English-speaking activists, in their struggle against right-wing extremism, have played an honourable and often a leading role in spite of the different types of censorships they are suffering from. They have published books and essays documenting the errors and excesses of Hindutva. They have also made films and staged plays recalling and extolling the inclusive ideals of the multi-ethnic democracy Indians live in, like for example novelists Kiran Nagarkar, Vikram Chandra or Githa Hariharan and filmmakers like Paromita Vohra. India's first and oldest feminist press, Kali for Women, has been publishing titles by and about women activists, others which are more theoretical, in order to increase the body of knowledge on women in India and to provide with a space to the women's voices. One of their so many successes has been to publish



English translations of fictional writings by women from other Indian languages and to deal with women's lives under fundamentalism.

In 2009, a group of activists of the Sri Ram Sena (the Army of Lord Ram) barged into the pub "Amnesia – The Lounge" (Bangalore, India), and beat up a group of young women and men, claiming the women were "violating traditional Indian values."<sup>3</sup> The founder and leader of SRS, Pramod Muthalik, declared that they did that in order to "save our mothers and daughters." He had already announced an action plan to target couples found dating on Valentine's Day: "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."<sup>4</sup> As a response, a few young women in Bangalore, India, started the Pink Chaddi<sup>5</sup> Campaign to protest against the Sri Ram Sena threats on them. Tens of thousands of Indian women have joined a protest organized on Facebook (A Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women), to strike back against moral policing by religious conservatives.<sup>6</sup>

In order to prove that the women's movement in India has a long and rich history, I will offer an overview of those women who rebel against their prescribed gender role. The women's movement in India has been heterogeneous in its different forms in diverse parts of the subcontinent. Its plurality, but at the same time union among women, has made it a strong movement. The presence of women in the public sphere has been significant, as their mobilization has been part of major events in the history of India. However, there are also millions of ordinary women in the country who struggle to survive in order to remake their family and social lives, whether fighting for water and electricity, literacy, safe contraception, or resisting sexual harassment.

## 2. PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

For a long time, feminists ignored their own tradition of a succession of women saints and other women writers who had inverted and even subverted the classic ideals of womanhood embodied in the hegemonic texts. Now, empowerment enables women to take greater control over their lives and to transform the world by means of literature.

During the pre-colonial period (that is, from 13<sup>th</sup>-c AD to 18<sup>th</sup>-c) we come across a long line of women saints: Mahanubhav women, Varkari women, ... The Mahanubhav sect emerged in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> -century. Some of its components were Mahadamba, Kamalaisa, Hiraisa, Nagaisa, Chakradhar (the founder of the sect). Chakradhar's radical measures included a ban on the ritual isolation of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/02/02/blog01/1233598715.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hindu.com/2009/02/06/stories/2009020657590100.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Chaddi means underwear in Hindi.

<sup>6</sup> More information about the campaign at <http://thepinkchaddicampaign.blogspot.com>. Fiction writer Sunny Singh has also published her views on this topic in her own blog, <http://sunnysinghonline.blogspot.com/2009/02/panties-pubs-and-protests.html>

menstruating women, a common feature of Brahmanism. Baisa, another woman, also rebelled against the gender-based rules which permitted natural bodily movements and expressions for men but imposed severe restrictions on women.

On the other hand, the Varkari tradition tried to understand the full depth of women's protest in Maharashtra; the tradition of the Varkari sect remains today as a source of inspiration and comfort. Feelings are more important than learning, status and privilege. According to Lele (1981: 33), the Varkari poets spoke for a community of the oppressed (*sanvasarasranta*), criticizing the ideology through a philosophy of devotion in life known as Bhakti. The Varkari movement produced a long line of women saints. Women of all castes and regions in Maharashtra, such as Janabai, Muktabai, Gonai, Rajai, Ladai, and Bahinabai, left a rich body of literature.

All men saints in the Varkari movements always supported the cause of women. Janabai's poems offer us a combination of a deeply felt sorrow, a product of the fact that she was born as a woman. Bahinabai, even though a Brahmin by birth, she accepted Tukaaram, a Varkari saint of shudra origins, as her guru. She emerges as a woman who had come to terms with the problem of life, ready to take on a positive, active note, and who knows that life has come to an end for her. She defied the traditional ideal of a *pativrata* (a loyal wife) defended by the orthodox patriarchal order.

The years 1818-1984 span the period of colonial domination. Colonialism gave rise to a new English educated class of intellectuals which absorbed some of the radical bourgeois ideas from its western counterpart. There appeared a new body of creative and critical literature in Marathi, both by women and about women. There are three important 19<sup>th</sup> century women: Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910), Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Anandibai Joshi (1865-1889).

Tarabai inherited the tradition of the counter-cultural revolt by the oppressed non-brahmin castes of Maharashtra under the revolutionary leadership of Jotirao Phule who challenged all aspects of the brahmanical hegemony and gave a bitter and comprehensive exposure of brahmanic ideology. Tarabai offered the first fully worked out analysis of the ideological fabric of Hindu patriarchal society. She also has the distinction of being the first Indian feminist literary critic. Pandita took the courageous step of accepting Christian faith even though she came from the highest bracket of the Maharashtrian Hindu social order (she was by birth a chitpavan brahmin). She carried throughout her life a simultaneous battle against both the Hindu and the Christian religious hierarchies as well as against Hindu and Christian masculinist social norms. Joshi, after her marriage at the age of nine, she was compelled by her husband to embark on a course of western-style education, in a typical colonial reformist fashion. She was the first Indian woman to study modern medicine.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformers in India, the 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalists, communists and leaders of anti-Brahmin movements were already living in a world informed by western ideas, as their lives were defined by the far-reaching changes generated by colonialism. However, the model of Indian womanhood became similar to that of the Victorian British one. There are many theories about when the feminist thought was found in India, either introduced by the contact of the western world or as part of the Indian tradition.



A few books on the status of women in India were published, such as Mill's *History of British India* (1826), in which he stated that women's position was the indicator of society's advancement. The formula proposed was: "Among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted." He also stated about the Hindu society that "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women [who] are held in extreme degradation" (n.p.) The nationalist historian A. S. Altekar corrected Mill in his *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938), by giving an appreciation of Hindu culture's treatment of women, and joining the project for the compulsive glorification of the ancient and medieval past of India. That proposed "Golden Age" was described as a time of near equality with men. According to him, around 1000 BC women's situation suffered a decline, precipitated by the acceptance of non-Aryan women into Aryan households. He argued that there was a positive treatment of Hindu women, even though women were subordinate to men, because they were protected and respected.

By mid-18th century, women's status had hit rock bottom and begun its slow recovery with improvements in education, age of marriage, widow-remarriage, laws and customs, and recognition of women's economic potential. For the historian, women, the "fair sex," were naturally subordinate to men. The prehistoric people that he imagined consisted of patriarchal warriors in a setting in which men's dominance and protection over women was natural. The mark of man's civilization was the extent to which he controlled and curbed his power and gave women their rights. He also showed that the decline of women's status was due to the limited education resulting from early marriage. Biology was destiny, and he worried about the strain of intense study on women's health that could bring harm to the race. Though people historically practiced child marriage, preferred males, and prohibited inter-caste marriage, society was according to him harmonious. And finally, he justified fathers who preferred sons as these fathers loved their daughters, young brides were well treated in their husbands' homes (their youth made adjustment easier), and most wives lived up to the ideal of *pativrata*. As a conclusion, men were good husbands.

Ironically, the reform movement was initiated by men, with activists such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Malabari Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, and Karve, among others. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's struggle for the abolition of sati could mark the beginning of the movement for reform on behalf of women. They fought for legal reforms, for a legally equal position in society; the struggles were, essentially outside the home and the family. They fought to uproot the social evils of sati widow immolation, the custom of disfiguring widows, the ban on the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows, child marriage, age of consent, property rights and illiteracy through legal interventions. They were engaged in advancing the status of women by promoting their education and obtaining for them legal rights to property.

Women in this phase were categorized along with lower castes as subjects of social reforms and welfare instead of being recognized as autonomous agents of change. The emphasis was on recreating new space in pre-existing feminine roles of caring. The women involved were those related to male activists, elite, western educated, upper caste Hindus.



At the beginning of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, culture and politics united in a productive partnership in India, when the nationalist project disturbed the advance of empire. As Tharu and Lalita put it, the changes that took place in these decades set up the scenarios that underlay national life until the late sixties, and further, the cultural conjunctures of the eighties and early nineties need to be understood in the light of those earlier configurations (44). 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns included the fight against social practices such as dowry, child marriage, *purdah*, and the prohibition of widow remarriage as well as an education that would enable women to perform their roles as wives, mothers, and school teachers in an enlightened and socially useful mode.

Women formed part of the independence movements of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and contributed to the freedom of India from the British. During the period 1915 to 1947 struggle against colonial rule was intensified, and nationalism became the prominent cause. When M. K. Gandhi led his salt march, many women forced him to include them in the movement. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was an important social reformer, among others such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Bai Phule. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into a new philosophy of Ahimsa or non-violent civil disobedience movement against the Raj. One of the basic tenets of this philosophy is that in order to fight a non-violent revolution, it is necessary to build moral powers. Gandhi called for the people to arm themselves morally. He declared, thus, that equality for women would be one of the central objectives of his political program. He emphasized that nothing less than the total involvement of the entire population in the non-violent struggle for freedom would be adequate. It was imperative to involve women in the mass movement. He urged women to step out of their homes and join him. He exalted their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance.

Women-only organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC), and National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with the issues of scope of women's political participation, women's franchise and civic rights of women in Indian constitution. Provisions for women's upliftment through affirmative action, maternal health and child care provisions (*crèches*), equal wage equal work, etc. State acquired the patronizing role towards women. The main specific event was the All India Women's Conference in 1920, where women posed their views on the struggle for independence, women's education and the right to vote. The question of women's suffrage was raised in 1917, and many women were skeptical that the granting of universal adult suffrage would result in equality for women. However, in the early twenties the provincial legislatures voted in favor of enfranchising women on the same basis as men.

Sarojini Naidu became in 1925 the first woman President of the Indian National Congress, an important success. Women's organizations demanded equal rights, such as the All India Women's Conference on women's education, which was organized by the Women's India Association in 1927 and which reconstituted itself into a permanent national body. Muthulakshmi Reddi, who resigned from the Legislative Assembly as a nationalist in 1930 when Gandhi was arrested, felt that women were being forced into a situation in which their interests were being subsumed in the designs of the Congress party. In 1942, Jawaharlal Nehru, while preparing for an attack from Japan, called women to fight as equals outside the



homes, which –according to Tharu and Lalita– reveals how invisible the subjugation of women had been rendered in the ideology of liberal nationalism (88). The utopia ended soon when the social and cultural ideologies and structures failed to honor the newly acquired concepts of fundamental rights and democracy.

### 3. POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD: 1947–1969.

The years immediately following independence saw an emergence of publications on Gandhi and nationalist women. Some important books are: Neera Desai's *Woman in Modern India* (1957), P. Thomas's *Indian Women through the Ages* (1964), Manmohan Kaur's *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement 1857-1947* (1968), and a revised edition of A. S. Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1959). These books mark the beginning of scholarship on women that placed women and gender questions at the centre of the analysis and interrogated records in new ways.

Desai and Thomas were more concerned with their Indian audience and less preoccupied with convincing the world that Hindu civilization was kind to women. So, although old-fashioned in many ways, Desai and Thomas wrote women-centered texts, espoused feminism, and championed democracy and pluralism. Neera Desai's *Woman in Modern India* (1957) analyses the Vedic society, Buddhist period, Puranic Hindu society, Muslim rule, and the British Raj, and she found out that there was no "golden age" for women, as antiquity was patriarchal, and "great women" were under male domination. She argues that the *Puranas* were written to establish Brahmins as the highest class, which further excluded women and limited their influence. As for the Muslim rule, these women had further restrictions on rights and freedom because of *purdah* and polygyny.

According to Desai, the brightest spot was during the *bhakti* movement with its democratic tendencies, promotion of vernacular languages, and acceptance of women as spiritual equals. Later, the British men sought to change their society, and women benefited from the changes. Western ideas and technology justified and facilitated the exploitation. For Desai, 20<sup>th</sup> century women's entry into political and social organizations had an elitist nature. It is true that women gained gender equality in the Constitution, but the old fossilized, oppressive institutional and ideological legacy prevented them from enjoying rights granted under it.

She was critical of the "pseudo-scientific" theories that defined sex-differences as fundamental, since the main differences among women are those related to their class, caste and religion. Desai basically described women in modern India as economically vulnerable, dominated by patriarchy, politically and educationally disenfranchised, and socialized. For the times, this was a new, even radical view.

On the other hand, P. Thomas's *Indian Women through the Ages* (1964) moved chronologically from the Indus Valley civilization to post independence India. As Desai, he did not find a golden age in ancient India, but rather increased subjugation of women. He found out that during the Middle Ages, Brahminism had deprived women of their individuality and they remained in subjugation until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women's emancipation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century culminated in the legal and constitutional rights.





For him, improvement in women's status was a function of three forces: British rule, a general awakening in 20<sup>th</sup> century Asia, and the Indian freedom movement. During the fifteen years after independence, only the upper classes had benefited. Men and women were fixed categories: men dominated, women were subordinate. He concluded that the cause of women's subjugation was Brahminism for the institutionalization of a priesthood that suppressed both women and other Indian communities preventing sex equality, true democracy, and Indian pluralism.

Gandhi and Shah view the Women's Movement in India in the form of three waves. Briefly, the first began with the mass mobilization of women during the national movement. During a decade after independence, women engaged less in political activity. The writer who had earlier refused to accept the housing offered by a colonial authority, in the fifties and sixties slips back into the family. During this period, a substantial number of poets and novelists were writing in English along with several literary movements that were taking place in vernacular languages such as the *Nayi Kahani* movement in Hindi, *Navya* in Kannada, the *Digambara Kavulu* in Telugu, the *Adhunika Kavitha* in Malayalam, and the *Navkavya* and *Navkatha* movements in Marathi. The canon of most Indian literatures was being consolidated in those years, while many women's writings were forgotten.

It was not until the late sixties when the movement saw its most activist phase as it brought a more realistic change, paying attention to economic and external issues such as dowry deaths, the problems of divorce, inheritance and abortion laws, and the practice of *sati*. The second wave, from the late sixties onwards, saw a resurgence of political activity by women due to the fact that growing unemployment and rising prices led to mass uprisings. There was a growth of middle-class women's organizations in urban areas as well as organizations of working women fighting for their right to independent livelihood and basic resources like credit, training and access to technology. According to these authors, this second wave saw mass participation of women in popular upsurges against the government, and power structures in general, but the third wave, which emerged in the late seventies, had a specific feminist focus.

#### 4. THE 1970S.

After Independence, when the Congress Party came into power, India lived a sense of complacency in women's organisations. 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian reformers made efforts on behalf of women, but limited change to the domestic sphere. Gandhi and the Indian National Congress remained the acknowledged champions of women while the period from 1947 until the mid-1970s received the most attention. By the mid-70s, interest in women's status was renewed, since women were disturbed by the total invisibility and neglect of their economic roles. By the late sixties, the economy began to collapse, and away from the metropolitan cities, promises of social and economic justice remained unredeemed. Urban unemployment remained high and the prices of essential commodities rose along with food shortages. Example are the anti-price-rise agitations of 1972 and 1973 organized and led by women, and the Progressive Organization of Women in Hyderabad, which ran popular campaigns against the



harassment of women students in 1973. The Self Employed Women's Association struggled for equal wages, and the Chipko movement for the women's right to land.

The period 1970-1985 can be considered the phase of the women's movement that excavated the past and criticized the then present. The 1975-1977 period of Emergency marked the beginning of the women's movement in India. The search for answers was carried out during a difficult political time in India's modern history. Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency coincided with the inauguration of International Women's Year. Many women who belonged to organizations critical of Mrs. Gandhi went to prison while others published underground papers, went into hiding, or remained silent and waited for new opportunities. When the Emergency was lifted in 1977, India witnessed a renewal of feminist activity.

The publication of *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* in 1974 was crucial. The committee that made the research was appointed in 1971 by the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare on a United Nations request for a status of women report for International Women's Year in 1975. The aim was to examine the Constitutional, legal and administrative provisions that had a bearing on the social status of women, their education and employment, and to assess the impact of these provisions. They conducted studies and interviewed approximately 500 women from each state. In this report, they concluded that the position and rights of women in Indian society had not significantly changed, as women's status had not improved in the twenty-five years since independence.

The Indian Council of Social Science Research had an advisory committee on women's studies. Vina Mazumdar was asked to engage in further research on women's lives and work in contemporary India. This was the first systematic effort to question what constitutional guarantees of equality and justice actually meant to women. We find no broad generalizations about women in the research, and the analysis was interdisciplinary. When categorizing, they chose economic divisions with the political and social, and implications.

By the late seventies, issues related to women were being raised in a range of forums, and women's groups had emerged all over the country. The feminist journal *Manushi* started in 1979, providing an important voice for the emerging movement. The rape laws were changed, and issues related to family violence, the law, the household, health care, education, curricula, the media, and women's working conditions were set up. Gender was intrinsic to these rearticulations of social life in which women writers played an important part. By the end of the 70s and beginning of the 80s, the women's organisations discussed about rape, domestic violence, dowry, personal law, sati, and promoted the creation of new women-sensitive laws or amendments to existing laws. The strategies were diverse, such as public campaigns, demonstrations, street theatre, consciousness raising workshops, study circles, and advocating for legislative changes.

There was a flowering of interdisciplinary anthologies on Indian women, to name just a few, by Alfred de Souza, Devika Jain, and B. R. Nanda. Romila Thapar deplored the essentialism of historical documents, and concurrently a number of historians were discovering and recovering women's documents. Historians, working in the field, located manuscripts, private papers, collections of journals, and records of



organizations in trunks, *godowns*, and sometimes trash barrels. The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library's oral history project systematically contacted women freedom fighters for interviews and offered to house their private collections. In Madras, C.S. Lakshmi carried out wide-ranging interviews with Tamil women from all walks of life, then focused specifically on women writers, singers, dancers, and musicians, and hunted for obscure periodicals by women in archives and private collections. In North India, Gail Minault began her discovery of the records that led to *Secluded Scholars*. Gail Pearson searched police records in Bombay for details of women's participation in Congress-sponsored marches and demonstrations. Researchers used old records to ask new questions, interviewed women who had lived through the struggle for independence, tried to preserve women's documents, and crossed disciplinary boundaries in search of answers to complex questions, such as the feminist scholars: Rama Mehta, Bharati Ray, Aparna Basu, and Vina Mazumdar who turned to their mothers and grandmothers, and women in their communities to learn about the past. There was a passion for social justice shared by researchers and the connection between activism and the intellectual enterprise. Ashis Nandy suggested the importance of rethinking psychosocial phenomenon in relation to woman and womanliness.

Women's Studies began in India. The Research Center for Women's Studies at SNDT Women's University in Bombay began its work in 1974 with Neera Desai as director. The key area of inquiry was the women's social and economic condition. Micro-studies exploring single industries, tracing regional data, and studying neglected populations created a body of literature that provided material for later synthetic works. These studies attended to caste, class, religion, and regional differences.

According to Tharu and Niranjana, the main task for feminist theory during the 1970s and 1980s was to establish gender as a category that had been rendered invisible in universalisms of various kinds. They demanded changes that would make the law more sensitive to the cultural and economic contexts of women's lives (through eve-teasing campaigns, dowry deaths investigations, demonstration of inequalities in women's access to health care systems, etc.). In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, a new set of political questions appeared, such as engagement with issues of caste and religious affiliation/community and with new problems emerging from the liberalization of the economy. They relate gender analysis with class analysis, stating that the humanist subject and the social worlds legitimized bourgeois and patriarchal interests (235). Summing up, the 70's witnessed the beginning of a range of left and democratic movements.

## 5. THE 1980S.

By the 80s the Indian state formally shifted its broad economic policy towards an opening up of the economy, liberalisation. This implied an adoption of a model of economics where trade liberalization and export-led growth were seen as the only plausible development strategies for becoming competitive globally. Important changes marked this process affecting the Indian society at large and women in particular.



Vina Mazumdar opened the Center for Women's Development Studies in Delhi. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita founded in 1978 *Manushi*, India's leading feminist publication, in Delhi, which brought together scholarship on women with accounts of activism and personal testimony. In 1984 Ritu Menon and Urvashi Bhutalia founded the feminist publishing house Kali for Women, as an independent non-profit trust. The biannual Review of Women's Studies, *Economic and Political Weekly*, was also founded in 1986, and provided a valuable forum for the publication of new scholarship on women and gender.

Influential works were Gail Omvedt's *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (1980), Barbara D. Miller's *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India* (1981), and Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita's *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from Manushi* (1984).

Indian women were organizing themselves to protest injustice and fight for their rights. They led rallying cries that focused world attention on the deadly nature of son-preference and systematic and pervasive violence against women. The 80s witnessed the first national Women's Studies conferences and a host of local, regional, and national meetings focused on specific themes. The First National Conference of the Women's Movement was held in 1980 and discussed rape and abuse of women due to the Mathura Rape Case. This led the government to make an amendment in laws pertaining to rape in 1983. Section 498 A under the Indian Penal Code dealt with domestic violence, and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 was amended in 1984 and in 1986. The personal law was also created in 1985 after the Shahbano Case. The Supreme Court gave the right of a Muslim woman to maintenance.

During all these Conferences, women discussed divorce (*talaaq*) for Muslim women, sati due to the case in Rajasthan in 1988, women's reproductive rights, as they demanded that women's health should not be focused on their reproductive aspects. They struggled against hazardous contraceptives, especially those forced upon poor women.

Since the 80s, most autonomous groups, without party affiliations or formal hierarchical structures, are funded by non-governmental organizations. However, there has been a large scale co-option of feminist rhetoric by the state, which means that there has been a shift from 'struggle' to 'development' in the agenda of women's organizations. At the same time, the women who participate in these groups have become politicized and in many cases victimized by their employers –many of them have lost their jobs – as they attend Conferences that are against the government when actually they are working for it.

The debate in the autonomous women's groups was about how feminist politics could best be conducted. The critique from women in the Left parties was that these groups were urban and middle-class and therefore could not represent Indian women since the role of feminists was to raise questions within mass organizations. On the other hand, women within the autonomous groups pointed out that it was necessary for them to stay independent while allying on a broad platform because Left parties and trade unions were as patriarchal as any other.

The growth of international trade in goods and services, foreign and multi-national investment, that is, the direction of trade and investment towards economies with low labour costs has affected the lives of women. Globalization has witnessed the increasing role of international institutions in the lives of men and women such as the



International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Issues of food, health, medicine affected poor women directly. However, the traditional centre, the state, whom the women's movement addressed its issues is no longer in a position to take action.

In the 80's, Maxine Molyneux made a distinction between strategic gender interests and practical gender interests. While the first referred to those interests that would significantly alter gender and power relations and contribute to women's empowerment through effecting patriarchal bargains with state and men, practical gender interests took care of the immediate interests of women that no doubt enhanced their well-being but did not significantly alter the gender and power relations. Then, every man and woman is likely to spell out a different need list as his or her individual preference. Strategic gender needs in a grassroots framework cannot be stipulated without taking cognisance of what is happening at the local level and their impact on both men and women. Strategic gender empowerment cannot merely enable women to overcome patriarchal relations of domination of men over women.

## 6. THE 1990S

The World Conferences of the United Nations dealt with the internationalisation of women's issues. The Conference on Human Rights, which took place in 1992, recognized women's rights as human rights. The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing created a women's network around the world.

At the same time, a number of national level political parties were created in India, such as the A.I.D.W.A. (All India Democratic Women's Association), All India Women's Conference, National Federation of Indian Women, and Mahila Dakshata Samiti. India's integration into the global economy had repercussions on people's lives; agriculture, industry, health, education ... These forces plus patriarchy further oppressed women and other marginalised groups. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 aggravated religious communalism, and the communal carnage in Gujarat 2001 saw an extreme sexual violence against women.

So, with this background, we find the period 1986-1997, in which categories were challenged, and colonialism reassessed. Studies tried to redefine Indian history within a post-colonial framework, weaving gender into the meta-narrative, and developing theoretical perspectives. Since 1986 there has been an increase in the number of books, journals, and journal articles focused on women and gender in South Asia, and growing international interest in the topics addressed in these publications. This new direction in the study of women and gender in India made two influential works appear: *Women in Colonial India* (1989), edited by J. Krishnamurthy, and *Recasting Women* (1989) edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. Both volumes included previously published work, but their appearance as collections set the tone for future scholarship.

Krishnamurthy's *Women in Colonial India* raised the question of sources, lamented the dearth of material in official records about economic issues, and explained how "the ideology of the women's movement" suggested new ways of reading from the margins and interpreting silences. Women's lives were represented in ways that were faithful both to how women saw themselves and how they were



viewed from the outside. So, this period realizes the importance of studying women as participants in their own right and, at the same time, in relation to men.

Lucy Carroll and Gregory Kozlowski discussed how reformist colonial law affected women and both challenge Altekar's simplistic assumption that women's emancipation began with British rule. Tanika Sarkar, writing about the Gandhian movement, and Madhu Kishwar, highlighted the persistence of traditional elements in the reform movement. Together, these authors challenged accounts applauding the work of Indian social and political reformers.

Sangari and Vaid's *Recasting Women* linked academics to activism and stressed the important of understanding how the British reconstituted Indian patriarchy. They gave special attention to the resurgence of patriarchy in post-independence India manifested in atrocities against women, such as dowry murder and widow immolation, communal violence, and the marginalization of women in production. They created a powerful challenge to previously held assumptions about public and private spheres, the relationship of materiality to social issues, and the nationalist reform agenda for women.

Their concern was to understand how patriarchal institutions and discourse, reconstructed during the colonial period, continued to be effective in keeping women in their place. Thus, by moving away from women's history and embracing feminist historiography, the goal was to "recast" women, then gender, and finally history.

*Women Writing in India: 600 B. C. to the Present*, edited by Susie Taru and K. Lalita, was another influential work. Volume I (1991) offered translations of women's writing from the 6<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and volume II (1993) contains 20<sup>th</sup> century women writers representing eleven regional languages. Their aim was to recover women's writing as they had been marginalized, misrepresented and misjudged. They place the story of Muddupalani's life and writing as an allegory of the enterprise of women's writing and the scope of feminist criticism in India. In their introduction, they make an overview of feminist theory and criticism. They claim that not all literature written by women is restricted to allegories of gender oppression, and that ideologies –familial, of nation, of empire, etc.– are not experienced and/or contested in the same way from different subject positions. Given the specific practices and discourses through which individualism took historical shape in India, the working classes, the non-white races, Dalits and Muslims had to be defined as 'Other' in order that the Self might gain identity. This anthology has been very influential, having attracted the criticism of many academics. One of them is Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993), who focuses on the editors' statement that the recovery of women's writing, feminist literary criticism, and writing by women itself, are political rather than aesthetic activities.

All these are synthesizing works that sum up the existing scholarship and portray women as agents constrained by patriarchal attitudes and institutions. Another influential research was Radha Kumar's *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (1993), a wonderfully illustrated look at women's movements and activism. Geraldine Forbes's *Women in Modern India* (1996) focused attention on how women perceived their world and acted in it. Drawing on women's writings, organizational records, magazines and journals, oral histories, and private papers and letters, she presented



socially and politically active upper and middle-class women as thoughtful participants in the events of their time. Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own* (1994) is an encyclopedic account of gender and land rights, and Susan S. Wadley's *Struggling with Destiny in Karimpur, 1925-1984* (1994), is a longitudinal study in which she lets villagers of this North Indian place tell their own story.

Scholars no longer investigate "women's problems" but rather ask why women and their issues are seen as problematic. For those who are in India, writing women's history is a political act. As Mill justified, British rule by referring to women's status and modern politicians seek to use history, and especially the history of women, for their own ends. The writing of women's history has been influenced by trends in history as well as newly uncovered sources and the changing political climate. Historical analyses that focus on representation without concern for material existence have sparked a great deal of controversy. For example, articles that defend *sati* or extol the charms of *purdah* seem detached from the real world and an understanding of the extent to which these customs oppress women.

The writing of history has been dramatically affected by the efforts of scholars to search out and preserve women's records. Organizations such as SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) founded in Mumbai in 1987, face formidable obstacles in its attempt to preserve women's photographs, recordings, and oral histories. SPARROW is not alone and many women's organizations as well as libraries and archives are actively engaged in collecting and preserving material by and about women.

Rosalind O'Hanlon delineated three advances historians have made in addressing questions of social change in colonial Indian society: first, the break with colonial rhetoric about tradition and Indian women; secondly, a new understanding of the modernizing Indian woman in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; and lastly, new insights into gender and the construction of colonial hegemony.

Women's history has had an immense impact on Women's Studies and the work of historians is considered vital to the enterprise. During this period, we also find single memoirs of prominent women, such as Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, *An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life* (1994), edited by Geraldine Forbes; Lakshmi Sahgal's *A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs of a Political Activist* (1997); and collective memoirs such as Sumitra Bhavé's *Pan on Fire* (1988) which gave voice to *dalit* women; and Stree Shakti Sanghatana's *We were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle* (1989). All these projects were meant to retrieve women's writings and voices stimulated reflection on agency, victimhood and women's cultural differences.

Malashri Lal's *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* suggests a methodology for Women's Studies in India, filling the gap feminist theory could not satisfy due to the inability of western modes to explain the Indian situations in life and literature. She claims that the term 'feminism,' with its western connotations, is a largely suspect term in India (25). She goes on differentiating the popular notion of feminism and the prevalent idea of 'woman' in India. The first is linked with aggressive gender positioning and is thought to be man-rejecting and anti-family, while the assumed idea of a gentle and in need of protection woman still persists. For a woman to become feminist, she must take the initiative and



therefore is considered unpleasant by society. On the other hand, if she is recipient of action done in her favour by male promoters of female dignity, she is then seen as part of progressive society. Since 'feminism' is an imported word for which there is no equivalent in the Indian languages, it places a few Indian women in a category seen to be foreign. Lal explains that in Hindi, *Narithwa* appears as a non-aggressive term meaning women's concerns. However, the matter is one of nomenclature rather than belief, since the concepts of feminism (read: demand for economic freedom, employment, legal fairness, etc.) when introduced as 'women's concerns' are understood easily through rich vernacular languages. An excellent report about common people's thoughts on feminism in India is Paromita Vohra's *Unlimited Girls*.

According to Jain (1991), differences of cultural behavior and family structures have shaped the feminine perspective in the Indian subcontinent differently from the developments in Western cultures. She claims that the changes, which took place with the feminist movement, were the natural aftermath of a political upheaval – women joined the workforce, were educated and became economically independent, supported families – because it submerged in the freedom struggle. Thus, women did not question the accepted social structures, as all this led to a reinforcing of traditional attitudes (67).

## 7. CURRENT FEMINISM IN INDIA.

The idea that feminism is a concept associated with people who disrupt social structures, mainly the institution of marriage, is a stereotype. As we have argued above, the history of women's movements in India is very rich and dates long before India got Independence from the British Empire. However, the concept of identity politics acquired currency mainly in the early 90's.

Feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions. There is no abstract definition applicable to all women at all times. Feminism is articulated in different ways depending on local situations and issues such as time, country, culture, education, as stated in *Feminism in India* edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (4). Within a country, it is also articulated differently by different women depending on their class, background, level of education, consciousness etc. Feminism is felt as a duty to bring to a large public the richness and scope of the intellectual effort of women's studies to locating, understanding and explaining problems connected with the relationship of men and women, of women to each other and of both to society and social institutions in general, in order to find solutions.

Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan state in their *Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia* that a feminist is one "who recognizes the existence of sexism (discrimination on the basis of genre), male domination and patriarchy, and who takes some action against it" (3). However, it has to be accompanied by action, by challenge to male domination. This action can take any form. For instance, a woman's decision to educate and pursue a career, or not to be humiliated, or her decision not to have children are feminist actions. Feminism is not a one-dimensional social critique but a multi-layered transformational, political and ethical practice. In





feminist studies, women are both the subjects and objects of study. As male biases were uncovered in existing theory, feminist studies re-examined society and social theory and concluded that as women and women's perspective were missing from the social sciences, history, literature, and so on.

An excellent study on feminism related to caste issues can be found in *Gender and Caste*. Feminist scholars have certainly engaged with caste issues through studies of women labor, sociological studies of women from diverse caste communities, studies of kinship, and research on poverty, to name just a few sites. But the recent debates about caste and feminism make a rather different argument, and one that cannot be collapsed into an assertion that feminism has responded to the gendered manifestations of caste inequality through its orientation towards social transformation (2003: 4).

Feminism speaks with many voices. The main strands of feminism in India are liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, Islamic feminism and Gandhian feminism. However, within this common understanding, there is room for considerable disagreement. According to Suma Chitnis, there are at least three specific points on which the perceptions of large number of Indian women diverge from those of the western-influenced feminists. By far, the most conspicuous of these is the average Indian woman's disapproval of feminist anger. The second is their somewhat mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and particularly on men as the principal oppressors. The third is their relative inability to tune in to the demands for equality and personal freedom.

For example, American societies have, since the last three or four decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, loudly asserted equality. Yet, they have refused to accept women as equals. Women have had to fight for in spite of the commitments that were made. The situation in India is altogether different. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. The several hierarchies within the family (of age, sex, ordinal position, affinity and consanguinity and other kinship relationships) or within the community (particularly caste, but also lineage, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power) have been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief.

It is argued by many theorists that this concept of equality, as a correlate of the concept of individual freedom, is alien to Indian society. It was first introduced into Indian culture through western education and through the exposure of western-educated Indians to liberalism at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it did not become an operational principle of Indian life until the country achieved independence and adopted a democratic system of government. At that point, the constitution granted women political status fully equal to that of men.

Thus, activist Madhu Kishwar rejects the term 'feminism,' arguing that the particular socio-historic context in which the movement arose in the West is specific to that culture, as the agendas in the Indian circumstances and culture are different from those in the West. In her essay "Why I Am Not a Feminist" (1990), she discusses several examples to support the idea that the term 'feminism' is inadequate in the subcontinent, saying: "[w]e need to understand the aspirations and nature of women's stirrings and protests in different epochs in the context of the dilemmas of their age, rather than impose our own aspirations on the past" (5).



There is another fact in the Indian scene that makes it different from that of the feminist movement in the West: many of the catalyzing agents to either improve the status of women or to include in socio-political and religious movements have been Indian men. Nancy A. Falk has a deeper analysis of this issue in her “*Shakti Ascending: Hindu Women, Politics, and Religious Leadership during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*” (1995). Even the term ‘Hindu’ is proposed as complex, as it covers many communities (legally, in India, the term includes Buddhism, Jainism, and the Sikh traditions). So, she proposes considering questions of gender in the contexts of caste, class, and age hierarchies. Furthermore, Vasudha Narayanan argues that both terms ‘feminism’ and ‘rights’ are alien to the Hindu discourse, as they both concepts carry a special Western flavor (26).

Feminism in the West emerged as a powerful challenge to existing power structures and gender equations at the level of the family, the economy and the polity. However, this word still evokes no such positive connotation in India. Most of those men and women who fought valiant struggles for women’s rights in India did not feel the need to use the term for their ideas and work. Furthermore, many Indian activists argue that feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. In recent years it has become fashionable to talk of the distinct nature of Third World feminism. The underlying assumptions and basic ideology remain essentially the same: an analysis of how women are represented in colonial and postcolonial literature, which challenges assumptions and stereotypes about women in both literature and society. Though both colonialism and patriarchy have been closely entwined historically, an end to formal empire has not meant an end to the oppression of women in the former colonies. Postcolonial feminists point out the ways in which women continue to be stereotyped and marginalized, ironically sometimes by postcolonial authors who might claim to be challenging a culture of oppression.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her introduction “Cartographies of Struggle” to her *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, points out that the political struggle of women in India is the fight against racist, colonialist states and for national independence. Kumari Jayawardena, in writing about feminist movements in Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, defines feminism as “embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system” (1986: 2). Mohanty goes on to assert that these movements arose in the context of (a) the formulation and consolidation of national identities which mobilized anti-imperialist movements during independence struggles, and (b) the remaking of pre-capitalist religious and feudal structures in attempts to ‘modernize’ third world societies (9).

Although the term ‘feminism’ was not born in South Asia, the concept stands for transformational process which started in South Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as an organised and articulated stand against women’s subordination, during struggles against foreign rule and against the local despotism of feudal monarchs. There are two definitions of feminism which were accepted by women from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in two South Asian Workshops. As put by Bhasin and Said Khan:



feminism is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at the place of work and within the family and conscious action to change this situation [...]. Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation. (3)

We could argue, then, that feminism is not a foreign ideology, as feminist consciousness arose long ago.

According to Ruth Vanita, in her chapter "Thinking Beyond Gender in India," any women's movement must take, firstly, repairing the structures of heterosexual marriage and family, making them somewhat more equitable or secondly, that of rethinking genre and sexuality to liberate both women and men into developing different kinds of family or collective living. Women's movements in India have only taken the first direction, that of reforming marriage and the laws (73). Theories seem so abstract and though they are attractive, women need to understand day to day problems and they want to know what to do when facing sexual division at work, doing the housework or taking care about the family. Problems come from the past, so interpreting it is a way of finding solutions, but it requires a great deal of information about society, culture, economy and politics.

One problem is suggested by Maithereyi Krishnaraj, who considers that there is not enough material in India to teach women studies, although there is an abundance of books from the West. Every theory or analysis is stifled. However, there are theoretical discussions in learned journals, but the language used is not accessible to students or common people which are far from institutions of higher learning, without the kind of resources these privileged institutions enjoy. Women's organizations are trying to provide training programmes with easily comprehensible material, in order to give students a beneficial feedback. Krishnaraj complains that if there are readable sources, they are in English so they must be translated into their regional languages for a wider readership. She highlights, though, that Mandira Sen, of Stree Kolkata, produced a series of small books on "Concepts, in an easy, plain and readable style." Those books presented a broad theme of "theorizing" on a range of issues worked on by many women studies' scholars. While women's studies may be located in a particular faculty, the content and approach is inevitably interdisciplinary. Now there are selections edited by well-known scholars, coming out regularly but they are only for specialized readers. Kamla Bhasin, the founder of Jagori (a documentation, training, communication & resource centre on women-related issues) and of SANGAT (South Asian Network of Gender Activists & Trainers), trains social workers on issues related to patriarchy, gender, women's movement, feminism, sustainable development, etc., but since she finds that the literature on these issues is very academic and most of it cannot be understood by activists, Bhasin has written her booklets in a question and answer form, which have been translated into almost thirty languages. *Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia* is one of her series of pamphlets, where we can find for example "Understanding Gender" and "Exploring Masculinity." And more recently, Mary E. John, Director at the Center for Women's Development Studies in New



Delhi, has edited *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*, where she provides a map of the development of women's studies in India from the 1970s to the 1990s.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Does the question of Indianness refer to "The Hindu Way of Life," as scholar Meera Nanda argues in her book *Breaking The Spell of Dharma*? We could conclude that we cannot offer a monolithic definition of Indian identity, as India is a multicultural nation, with thousand of different languages, communities and traditions that cross borders in spite of the fact that nationalistic discourses emphasize a uniform Hindu culture. As Arundhati Subramaniam states:

I believe it is important to periodically reassert one's resistance to this quest for the "identifiably Indian" – a quest that tells us more about the seeker than the sought. Underlying it, clearly, is another guise of colonialism, based on the premise that there is a core Indianness that can and should be identified, labelled, itemised and brandished like a visa (to what might seem like Destination Literary Paradise but is actually a literary ghetto). Not so very different, after all, from the fundamentalists back home who are forever devising Procrustean means to arrive at unitary cultural identities.

Activists' groups devoted to promote gender equality are stigmatized by fundamentalists as anti-Indian, as they interpret such a concept as a western phenomenon. This ideology seems to contradict the documents which prove that the women's movement in India has a long and rich history which dates during the pre-colonial period. Intellectuals have joined the cause by clearly stating that demanding equality is not un-Indian.

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