

COMMENT

“Full Rights” Feminists in South Asia: Freedom, Equality, and Justice

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Abstract

Histories of feminism in the past three decades have focused on the debate between equal rights and separate spheres, but have been less attentive to the many strands of socialist feminisms, which sought to build bridges between the women’s movement and other social movements for freedom, equality and justice. Dorothy Sue Cobble addresses this gap, exploring the lives and works of social democratic women activists in relation to the equal rights versus separate rights debate. Reflecting the “global turn”, Cobble explores many transnational connections. Picking up on these two themes – socialist feminism and global networks – I focus on the South Asian case.

The burgeoning histories of feminism in the past three decades have focused on the debate between equal rights and separate spheres, but these have been less attentive to the many strands of socialist feminisms, which sought to build bridges between the women’s movement and other social movements for freedom, equality, and justice. This gap in the accounts of women’s movements in the United States has attracted scholarly criticism.¹ Dorothy Sue Cobble addresses this gap, focusing on multiple social democratic traditions within the US women’s movement in the twentieth century, renaming them “full rights” feminism and exploring the lives and works of social democratic women activists in relation to the “equal rights versus separate rights” debate. She underlines the breadth of their demands, which combined civil and political rights with social and economic entitlements. Moreover, like socialist feminist movements for most of the twentieth century, her book is self-consciously internationalist. Reflecting the “global turn”, Cobble explores many transnational connections. Picking up on these two themes – socialist feminism and global networks – I focus on the South Asian case.

¹Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage* (New Haven, CT, 1997), pp. 274–278. Lise Vogel, “Socialist Feminism”, in *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism* (London, 1995); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “Socialist Feminism: What Difference Did It Make to the History of Women’s Studies?”, *Feminist Studies*, 34:3 (2008), pp. 497–525.

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The “collective biography” approach, which Cobble adopts in this book, has two signal advantages. First, it prompts us to explore the networks that powered movements. It enables us to link places and spaces, movements, and geographies, and to appreciate more clearly the braiding of the local, the national, and the global. The power of universals in the analyses of patriarchy and capitalism opened for women new imaginaries of the world as well as facilitating the forging of alliances and solidarities. The biographical approach also allows for connecting the personal and the political, a matter of great concern to feminist historians. From the 1970s, women’s history has provoked an enormously productive turn away from conventional “politics” and women’s political participation defined entirely by masculine concerns. There is now renewed interest in linking the concerns of the public and the private; exploring the politics of states, institutions, communities, and families in a connected way from a perspective of gender.

The latter has been the subject of much recent discussion in South Asian history. Pursuing a “collective biography” strategy to tell the story of communist women in colonial Bengal (India) in the 1930s and 1940s, Soma Marik speaks of a “double invisibility”: the invisibility of women in history and, moreover, a dominance given to the discourse of class in the writing of histories of communist movements, which “blurred the distinctive attempts women members have made to create a gendered space for themselves”.² An important aspect of this is the leaching out of the “personal” from histories of political movements. When women leaders write official or semi-official Party histories, they leave out patriarchy. Only in some memoirs (famously those of Manikuntala Sen and Kanak Mukherjee) do we see the imprint of a double radicalism – communist women fighting as women and in the class struggle together with men comrades.³ One could extend the metaphor of “double invisibility”. Tanika Sarkar argues that the attention to the “personal” since the 1980s has been so overwhelming that we are in danger of losing sight of the “political woman”.⁴ It is increasingly recognized that connecting the personal and the political – drawing attention to the many ways in which the political is also personal – adds new insights to histories of women’s movements as well as their feminists’ contribution to other big political questions of their time. The pioneer has been (as in many other aspects of gender in colonial South Asia) Geraldine Forbes, who first marked a significant shift in the revolutionary movement in the 1930s, noting the appearance of romantic and sexual liaisons in life-narratives as well as fiction. While women were being inducted into all major political movements – mainstream Gandhian nationalist movement; the revolutionary movements; and many shades of left, socialist, and communist groups – the condition of their entry and participation was social conformity.⁵ Durba Ghose suggests that

²Soma Marik, “Breaking Through a Double Invisibility: The Communist Women of Bengal”, *Critical Asian Studies*, 45:1 (2013), pp. 79–118, 81.

³Two memoirs mentioned here: Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Calcutta, 2001) [Translated from the Bengali by Stree. Original Bengali title *Shediner Katha* (Calcutta, 1982)]; Kanak Mukhopadhyay, *Mone Mone* [In Reflection] (Kolkata, n.d.).

⁴Tanika Sarkar, “Political Women: An Overview of Modern Indian Developments”, in Bharati Ray (ed.) *Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 541–563.

⁵Geraldine Forbes, “Goddesses or Rebels? The Women Revolutionaries of Bengal”, *The Oracle*, 2:2 (1980), pp. 1–15.

political women sought to write themselves into history as well-behaved and desexed.⁶ However, such rules were made only to be broken. The themes of love, sex, and marriage in political movements stirred controversy from time to time in real life and in fiction. There were also women, especially among the left and communists, who experimented with living and loving; we have barely scratched the surface of such histories.⁷

The significance of this discussion lies in the trajectory of gender historiography in South Asia. There was a focus on social reform in the nineteenth century. In particular, changes in marriage regimes, the introduction of institutional education, and, significantly, of women's writing, were critical to the refashioning of women in elite professional and middle classes in colonial India. These refashioned "new women" were the subjects of politics in the twentieth century; they also engaged in debates about marriage, divorce, dowry, and inheritance.⁸ For newly educated women, questions of political change and social change did not always follow the conservative logic of nationalism, especially when reform in family laws, both Hindu and Muslim, caused such bitter controversy. On occasion, women activists saw deep connections between egalitarian political ideologies and their advocacy of more equitable gender relations. Their life choices followed their appreciation of these interconnections. These links between debates over social and political equality and their implications have not been fully appreciated in South Asian history. The task of effective collective biography is still before us: We need to dig locally for the histories of ill-behaved women, such as Bimal Pratibha, who evolved into a norm-breaking revolutionary.⁹ Even though some communist men and women did experiment with marriage or family during the forties and fifties, Bimal Pratibha was rather exceptional. Is she unique, though? We do not really know. We have a short account of Satyavati Devi, who had a similar political trajectory, but we know even less about her personal life.¹⁰

There has been rapid progress in our understanding of how South Asian women connected to the international women's movement. There is keen interest in women's international activism and global networks, which have been traced in two recent

⁶Durba Ghosh, "Revolutionary Women and Nationalist Heroes in Bengal, 1930 to the 1980s", *Gender and History*, 25:2 (2013), pp. 355–375.

⁷Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (London and New York, 2019). Gender relations in left and communist parties in a later period have been explored in Mallarika Sinha Roy, *Gender and Radical Politics in India: Magic Moments of Naxalbari (1967–1975)* (London and New York, 2011); and Srila Roy, *Remembering Revolution: Gender, Violence, and Subjectivity in India's Naxalbari Movement* (New Delhi, 2012).

⁸Bhaswati Chakrabarti, "The Second Social Reform Movement: Gender and Society in Bengal, 1930s–1950s" (unpublished Ph.D., Calcutta University, 2016).

⁹I found Bimal Pratibha in the late 1980s in the IB Archives. IB Archives, DIG, CID IB 271 of 1921. Later, Manju Chattopadhyay and Sandip Bandopadhyay carefully reconstructed her life story in two essays in Bangla. Manju Chattopadhyay, "Bimal Pratibha Devi", in *Itihash Anusandhan*, 13 (1999), pp. 574–578; and Sandip Bandopadhyay, "Bidrohi Nari Bimal Pratibha Devi", Eleventh Shaheed Pritilata Waddedar Memorial Lecture, Jadavpur University, 2009 (Kolkata, 2010). I have explored her life and writing a little more in "Gender and the Politics of Class: Women in Trade Unions in Bengal", *South Asia*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 218–227. For more on her later life, see Sonali Satpathi, "Mobilizing Women: The Experience of the Left in West Bengal, 1947–1964" (Ph.D., Calcutta University, 2013), ch. 6.

¹⁰Swati Chaudhuri, "My Only Wish is India's Freedom: History Sheet of Satyavati Devi", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 5:2 (1998), pp. 243–251.

books, both drawing attention to lesser as well as better-known leaders and lobbyists. At the centre of Sumita Mukherjee's pioneering study of the suffragette movement in colonial India is the idea of political networks. She places Indian suffragists within a multiplicity of networks, including national, regional, and international. Even though the issue of the vote addresses the state, women gathered across national borders. Thus, the suffragette movement had a critical international dimension and charge, not only in the obvious context of imperialism, but also in the way the category "woman" was imagined. For our purpose here, it is perhaps significant that suffragettes in India and the United States had myriad connections. Indian women activists particularly valued US suffragettes as collaborators, since they wielded power and influence as whites but were distanced from European imperialism. Mukherjee explores the involvement of Carrie Chapman Catt and Jane Addams in some detail. The National Council of Women in India (NCWI), founded in 1925, affiliated to the International Council of Women. As part of an international network of women's organizations, NCIW and some of its members became part of perennial webs of translocal feminist solidarities.¹¹

New research is busting the myth that winning the vote led women to return to home and family. We are told that the 1950s and 1960s were "dead decades" for Indian feminism, and that the autonomous women's movements in the 1970s and 1980s led to a new or second wave of feminism. The assumption is that, in the first decades of post-colonial polity, women were less involved; in fact, individual women's lives show a rich continuity of activism and public engagement across the watershed of independence and partition.¹² Annie Devenish, for instance, takes forward the study of suffrage beyond the colonial to an analysis of gendered citizenship in the newly independent Indian nation. Deploying a fine-grained "collective biography", Devenish shows how women continued to engage with social and political issues and how gender and politics was shaped within the interstices of collective or individual agency, the political and the personal. Her story is also enriched by a discussion of Indian women's participation in discourse about citizenship and human rights in global platforms. All these currents shaped and gendered postcolonial citizenship.¹³ In a study of women legislators in the Bihar and Madras legislative assemblies and the parliament, Wendy Singer shows how, in dealing with everyday issues, women legislators shaped Indian parliamentary democracy and challenged their own marginalization.¹⁴

In a similar genre with the themes of networks and internationalism, crossing the colonial and post-colonial divide, in *Citizens of Everywhere*, Rosalind Parr brings to the forefront the outstanding role played by a group of Indian women on the international stage in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of independence. The book

¹¹Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (New Delhi, 2018).

¹²Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, Uditi Sen, and Mytheli Sreenivas, "Introduction: A Country of Her Making", *South Asia*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 218–227.

¹³Annie Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship in India, 1930–1960* (New Delhi, 2019).

¹⁴Wendy Singer, "Women in the State: Elected Women and the Challenge of Indian Politics (1957–62)", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 247–263, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2021.1890257.

reminds us how closely entangled were stories of anti-colonial nationalism and internationalism in the long twentieth century. Among the key figures, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Amrit Kaur, and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit are the better known, but the significant contributions of Shareefah Hamid Ali and Hansa Mehta have not been given a similar prominence in existing historiography. This book uncovers not only many untold stories of Indian women's participation in international organizations and networks in different parts of the world, but it also shows the interconnections that Cobble has explored in the context of the US – the complex interrelationship of many strands of ideas and ideologies, such as imperialism, nationalism, and feminism, to be sure, but also health and human rights, suffrage, and social reform.

A more nuanced approach to women's internationalism must take into account tensions and fissures. At the first Paris Congress of Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in 1945, among the 850 delegates, there were four delegates from the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), while Vidya Kanuga (later Munshi) came from the All-India Students' Federation. Pushing to connect their anti-imperialist struggles with the fight against fascism, Indian delegates made a significant impact.¹⁵ These gains could not be fully realized since, with the advent of the Cold War, the WIDF became associated with the Soviet bloc. The Nehru-led government in power stymied a plan to hold the next meeting in Calcutta to focus on women of Asia and Africa. This triggered also the withdrawal of the AIWC from the WIDF. Eventually, the All-China Women's Democratic Federation and Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Women's Self-Defence League) (MARS) co-hosted the conference in Beijing in 1949. This congress marked two departures: it was the beginning of a dual track in South Asian women's internationalism and it facilitated a regional formation of socialist women in the south and south-eastern regions.¹⁶ Cobble confirms what I learnt from interviewing Vidya Munshi in 1997, that these strands came together again at the UN Women's Conference at Nairobi (1985), which was a watershed in bringing together different, by then even warring, strands within the women's movement.¹⁷ Yet, even the Nairobi moment was not without conflicts of race and regional inequalities. Malobika Chattopadhyay wrote of her experience of confronting racism and imperialism.¹⁸ From Beijing 1949 to Beijing 1995 was a long journey. As a member of the more than 500-strong Indian contingent in 1995, representing various strata from elite

¹⁵ Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41:2 (2016), pp. 305–331.

¹⁶ Yulia Gradszkova, "Women's International Democratic Federation, the 'Third World' and the Global Cold War from the Late-1950s to the Mid-1960s", *Women's History Review*, 29:2 (2020), pp. 270–288; Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, 19:4 (2010), pp. 547–573.

¹⁷ Samita Sen, interview with Vidya Munshi (8 and 16 July 1997), *Journal of Women's Studies*, 2:1 (1997).

¹⁸ Malobika Chattopadhyay, *Biswaloker Ahvane* [At the Call of the World] (Kolkata, 2011), p. 98; Jocelyn Olcott, "Cold War Conflicts and Cheap Cabaret: Sexual Politics at the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year Conference", *Gender and History*, 22:3 (2010), pp. 733–754.

leadership to grassroots activists and from various regions, I appreciated the rocky path as well as the heady energy of internationalism.

In the new millennium, new feminist histories are being written, challenging insular nationalism and highlighting women's battles for rights on multiple fronts. These accounts have been critical of universalisms that have not paid attention to difference, such as the rejection of reservations for women, and neglect of special provisions for Muslim and Dalit women. They have shown the mediating role of elite women, who have redefined the needs of poor women according to their own perceptions. Early in the history of the postcolonial nation, there was ample political space for activist middle-class women, perhaps at the cost of the claims of the poor and working women they sought to serve.¹⁹ At the same time, there was a breadth and range of social and welfare issues, from working conditions and protective laws, to family law, food security and health, that the AIWC, for instance, pushed onto the agenda of nation-making.

A second discernible theme in this new historiography is the dual role played by socialist and communist women. On the one hand, they were active in peasant and labour radicalism, playing critical roles in revolutionary movements such as Tebhaga and Telengana; on the other, in local fronts such as MARS and the National Federation of Indian Women, they became active in famine relief, refugee rehabilitation, and child protection. The 1960s were a turning point on two counts: the division of the communist party following the Sino-Soviet split, and the decision by communists to abandon confrontational politics in favour of electoral participation and parliamentary opposition. This redefined the social democratic space in India. Eventually, communists established political presence in the two states of Kerala and West Bengal, forming government periodically in the first and with a remarkable continuous unbroken record of being in government in the latter from 1977 to 2011. What implications have these landmark developments had for the articulation of "full rights" by feminists in India?

Let me conclude with recent developments on that front. Cobble describes in some detail the global impact of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded by Ela Bhatt in the 1970s. This association came about by breaking away from the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association to mobilize women workers in informal occupations. It drew on a heterodox combination of Gandhian and left ideologies. The second iteration of the feminist movement in India has celebrated such ideological heterodoxies, placing it at odds with the orthodoxies of establishment left, especially communist parties. In the immediate post-colonial period, the trade union movement pressured the state into creating a formal sector, small but with legal protections that compared well with international standards. The process of formalization marginalized women, pushing more of them into work in the informal sector. In recent years, since the ascendance of neoliberalism, the formal sector

¹⁹Abigail McGowan, "Mothers and Godmothers of Crafts: Female Leadership and the Imagination of India as a Crafts Nation, 1947–67", *South Asia*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 282–297; Mytheli Sreenivas, "Feminism, Family Planning and National Planning", *South Asia*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 313–328; Taylor Sherman, "Not Part of the Plan? Women, State Feminism and Indian Socialism in the Nehru Years", *South Asia*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 298–313; and Uditi Sen, "Social Work, Refugees and National Belonging: Evaluating the 'Lady Social Workers' of West Bengal", *South Asia*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 344–361.

workers and their trade unions have been under attack. After decades of neglect, trade unions are now recognizing the importance of organizing the vast heterogeneous informal workers, including women. They are seeking, in some measure, to follow in the path showed by SEWA. However, there are striking contradictions: on the one hand, women already in unions, such as plantation workers, are seeking an autonomous space outside the framework of malestream trade unions, as in Munnar (Kerala) in 2015; on the other hand, there are demands for unionizing emerging from new categories of women workers, who are approaching the central federated unions for affiliation. Two such movements are up against a combination of social prejudice and ideological inflexibility in the trade union establishment, including those of the left and communist parties: the sex workers and domestic workers. While very much in step with international currents, inspired by and feeding into global currents of labour and feminist movement, the question of unionization of sex and domestic workers is generating much heat and controversy in countries of South Asia. Internationally, today, a global crisis, preceding the pandemic but deepened by it, has provoked feminists into renewed theorization on social reproduction. This is resonating with feminists across South Asia, who are poised, one hopes, to reshape social democratic politics.