GENDER AND ETHNICITY

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The last decade of this century has seen a proliferation of South Asian and South Asianist feminist work on gender and ethnicity. I want to especially highlight here the crucial contribution the Delhi-based feminist press, Kali for Women, has made to this field of scholarship through the publication of landmark collections such as Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989), Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State, ed. Zoya Hasan (1994), Embodied Violence: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia, eds. Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (1996), and Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998).

To put it briefly, Recasting Women sought to de-naturalize the link between 'nation' and 'woman' and to problematise nationalism and communalism, particularly its re-inscription and re-ification of 'culture' and 'tradition' upon women's bodies. Forging Identities concentrated on interrogating the category 'Muslim' and delineating the multiplicities and contradictions that it encompasses while also highlighting the subordination of women's rights under minority politics. Embodied Violence and Borders and Boundaries introduced violence into this now de-naturalised equation between ethnicity and gender, nation and woman, and specifically focused on how women were both survivors as well as perpetrators of communal(ised) violence.

What I want to focus in this paper however, is the conceptual labour that has produced the contemporary theorization of gender and ethnicity. The particular question I wish to pose is why it has taken so long for South Asian feminists to theorize the conjuncture between 'ethnicity' and 'gender'. I want to explore some of the possible reasons for this by focusing on some Indian and Sri Lankan examples.

If one could conceptualise nationalism as providing an intellectual and political space to talk about 'ethnicity', and feminism as providing a similar space to talk about 'gender', one could then go another step further and posit that nationalism and feminism have both been conceived and perceived as liberatory discourses and practices. While nationalism has historically functioned as one of the most powerful weapons against
colonialism and provided a crucial space for the construction of post-colonial identities, feminism has and continues to function as the most powerful weapon against patriarchal structures of power which seek to oppress, exploit and subordinate women. It is thus not a mere coincidence that one of the earliest and now landmark books on feminism that was to come out of South Asia was *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), which was written by Kumari Jayawardena, a Sri Lankan. As Jayawardena notes in her Preface to this book, the "struggle for women's emancipation [during colonialism] was necessarily bound up with the fight for national liberation and formed an essential part of the democratic struggles of the period" (1986: ix-x).

While Jayawardena primarily describes nationalist struggles as being successful in "achieving political independence", "asserting national identity" and "modernizing society" as well as simultaneously enabling the emergence of an 'educated and 'enlightened', 'new woman', who participated in anti-colonial struggles alongside her male peers, she also acknowledges that this is not the "total picture" (Ibid: 3, 12-4). The "new woman could not be a total negation of traditional culture"; women still had to "act as guardians of national culture, indigenous religion and family traditions --in other words, to be both 'modern' and 'traditional!'" (Ibid: 14). Nevertheless, Jayawardena's central task in this book is to "uncover" the role played by women in nationalist struggles rather than highlight their subordination within them. Such a trajectory was very much tied to Jayawardena's project of insisting that feminism in the Third World could not be brushed off as a mere "importation" from the 'West', but rather, must be understood as being an organic part of the concerns of and struggles for nationhood and political and economic emancipation.

This project was also linked to a broader, global feminist concern to, in Joan Scott's words, "make women a focus of enquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative" (1987: 36). The early issues of the first feminist journal in Sri Lanka, *Voice of Women*, which were published in English, Sinhala and Tamil from the 1980s onwards, are also excellent examples of this kind of 'retrieval' - of women in the past as well as the present - that was taking place during this period. Many articles concentrated on analysing the representation of women in the local media, literary texts and school textbooks, while others sought to highlight the hitherto hidden inequalities and forms of violence that existed within society such as cultural constraints imposed on women, domestic violence, sexual discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, the exploitation of women in the plantation sector, and hazardous working conditions in the Free Trade Zone. The magazine also ran a series of articles which focused on contemporary women heroines from the working classes and peasantry.
The primary objective of South Asian feminists was thus to 'retrieve' and 'restore' the South Asian woman to her rightful place while simultaneously unmasking and struggling against the patriarchal structures of power that sought to continue to hide, ignore and subordinate her. This was a project then which united women across classes, religions, languages and ethnicities. The common enemy was patriarchy and the emphasis was on sexual difference.

But the 1980s was also the period within which South Asia experienced some of the most brutal and bloody ethnic riots and conflicts - the anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka in 1983 and the anti-Sikh riots in India in 1984, for example. While many groups of South Asian feminists were at the forefronts of movements which called for a cessation of violence and immediately dedicated themselves to working with survivors of riots (the majority of whom were women), it was clear that they did not have a set of conceptual tools with which they could even begin to grasp and to analyse this ugly underbelly of nationalism that had suddenly foregrounded itself. If one looks at South Asian feminist scholarship in the mid-eighties, one notices that frequently, an analysis of the 'ethnic question', as opposed to the 'woman question', is either deferred or taken up in other intellectual spaces.

Take for example, one of the key texts on the contemporary women's movement in India by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah. Entitled The Issues at Stake (1992), Gandhi and Shah carefully go through some of the central issues that has animated the feminist movement in India in the '70s and '80s - various forms of violence against women, health and reproductive issues, low wages and unequal treatment in the workplace and home, and legal battles about personal and custodial law. In their conclusion, the two feminists are rather apologetic that they have not been able to "come to grips with the complex issues of religion, fundamentalism and communalism" (1992: 325). Even the brief discussion that follows this statement, is taken up with considering the strategic purchase of religious symbolism and mobilisation rather than confronting the violent effects of such mobilisations.

In Sri Lanka, some feminists did participate in discussing and writing about the 'ethnic question', in the eighties, but such debates took place in other intellectual and political spaces. One such space was the Left movement, or at least certain circles within the Left. As Pradeep Jeganathan has recently argued, "Left scholars, who had been theorizing the crisis of the nation as a problem in nationalism and national liberation, turned to ethnicity as a categorical name for the new crisis of the nation" when the question of Tamil separatism came to the fore in the late 1970s, simultaneous with the decimation of the left movement in the national elections of 1977 (1998: 35).
In the first publication - *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka* (1985) - that resulted from these debates which spanned several years, the opening article by archaeologist Senake Bandaranayake makes a strong argument for the mobilisation of the category of 'ethnicity' in future Sri Lankan scholarship:

It is as common an error in day to day discourse as in the rhetoric of communal discord, to use the term 'race', with clear biological connotations, when what is meant is an 'an ethnic group'. What 'ethnic group' signifies is a historically defined, self-conscious community, which has its own distinctive history and culture, of which language and religion often constitute important aspects, and which has or had definite territorial affiliations, in the present and/or the past (1985: 4).

Similarly, Leslie Gunewardene's landmark paper "The People of the Lion" cautioned against projecting modern conceptions of 'ethnic consciousness' into the past and provided an extensive analysis and historicisation of the ethnic(ised) label - 'Sinhala'. Many of the other articles in this collection also sought to engage with terms such as 'cultural and linguistic consciousness', 'ethnic identity and representation', and 'communalism.'

What I am most interested in considering here however, is the sole contribution that was made to this volume, by a woman and a feminist - Kumari Jayawardena. Jayawardena argued that 'communalism' was a modern ideological formation and provided a careful analysis of its rise in conjunction with merchant capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Surprisingly, while the article engaged with the categories of class and communalism/ethnicity, it made no effort to engage with the category of gender or for that matter, even discuss women's positioning vis a vis these categories. A similar trajectory was followed by Jayawardena along with two other feminists - Serena Tennekoon and Radhika Coomaraswamy - who contributed articles to the sequel to this volume published two years later - *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka* (1987). While Coomaraswamy and Tennekoon were concerned with the contemporary re-constitution of ethnic identity among the Sinhalese and Tamils, Jayawardena sought to explore why there had been no serious theoretical debate, within the Left in Sri Lanka, on the existence or otherwise of a 'national question' - defined by Marxists as "the totality of political, ideological, economic and legal relations between national communities" (Nimni quoted in Jayawardena 1987: 230).

What is particularly interesting is that at the same time as feminists like Jayawardena were focused on theorizing 'ethnicity' and 'class', they were also actively
involved in several feminist organizations in the country. While Jayawardena was a founder member of the first feminist organization in the country - a multi-ethnic, Socialist women's collective entitled Voice of Women (founded in 1978)-- she was also, along with Coomaraswamy and Tennekoon, a founder member of yet another multi-ethnic group, Women for Peace (founded in 1984), which was formed in the aftermath of the anti-Tamil riots of July '83. The primary objective of the latter group was to protest against the increased militarisation of Sri Lankan society and to agitate for a peaceful and politically-negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict. How do we then understand the discontinuity between these women's feminist practice and their non articulation of a feminist perspective in their writings on ethnicity?

I have alluded so far to several possibilities for such a discontinuity. At the level of praxis, the South Asian feminists' primary objective, which Amrita Chachchi describes as the first phase of the women's movement in South Asia, was to emphasise sexual difference rather than ethnic, religious or class difference and to highlight patriarchal structures that impinged on all women. In fact, one of the most significant and unfortunate splits that occurred within the feminist movement in Sri Lanka had to do with the 'ethnic question'; after the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, feminists who sought to question the pervasiveness of Sinhala hegemony within Sri Lankan society and began to critique Sinhala nationalism and militarism, diverged drastically from those who refused to perceive these issues as being central to the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. Much of this work however, took place in the wake of prior theorizing on 'ethnicity' which had taken place in other fora. As Radhika Coomaraswamy noted in a 1984 article on the "Politics of Ethnicity", a discussion of ethnic conflict automatically raises the issue of nationalism and calls for a re-evaluation of the oft repeated argument that "cultural nationalism based on a collective ethnic consciousness of groups, has moved third world countries a step ahead from feudalism and colonialism" (1984: 191). Recall also, Jayawardena's 1986 shift towards such cautionary note.

This discontinuity between praxis and theory was also a symptom of the patriarchal hegemony that pervaded scholarship in and on South Asia. As I noted earlier, the late seventies and early eighties were mainly taken up with South Asian feminists trying to retrieve women's histories and lay bare patriarchal biases and prejudices not just in the production of knowledge about South Asia but within South Asian society and culture as well. The fruition of such conceptual labour is especially well articulated in the later work of Jayawardena:

Gender can be viewed as a core element of the ethnic issue...It is true that women within the ethnic group are segmented in various ways and
that they will participate in the religious and ethnic processes differently as determined by their class, age or status in the family (Anthias and Davis, 1983). Yet what is crucial is that the ethnic identity of each group is frequently expressed in terms of its womanhood and its vision of the ideal woman. She symbolizes the purity, continuity and exclusivity of the ethnic group and is therefore central to ethnic discourse (Jayawardena 1993: 161-2).

I think one of the central contributions of feminist scholarship has been to prize out ethnicity from within a nationalist framework. If we wish to continue to mobilise the category 'ethnicity', and I see no reason why we should not do so, I sincerely feel that this is the path we have to take.

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Works Cited:


Notes:

1 A similar definition is given in the short essay, "Why Ethnic Studies" in the brochure published by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo which was yet another important space within which the category of 'ethnicity' was debated and continues to be debated since the institution's founding in 1982 to grapple with the changing political and social climate in the country. For a thoughtful critique of the definition of 'ethnicity' that appears in this text, see Pickering 1994: 139-140. Other important spaces within which debates on 'ethnicity' took place were the Centre for Society and Religion, the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, and the Committee for Rational Development.

2 The only instance where Jayawardena even mentions women is in conjunction with what she terms 'racist' attitudes of the Sinhalese towards their women marrying those perceived to be non-Aryans (migrant workers from Kerala), in the 1930s. She refers to an article in a Sinhala newspaper which specifically condoned Hitler's anti-Semitic policies of prohibiting similar kinds of marriages between Aryan and non-Aryan Germans (1984: 137-8).