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Unpacking the histories, contours and multiplicity of India's women's movement(s) — An interview with Uma Chakravarti

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Abstract

Uma Chakravarti is a distinguished feminist activist, historian, teacher and film-maker. She taught at Miranda House, University of Delhi and has been a leading light of India's women's movement(s) for more than forty years. She has written extensively about women's issues ranging from the women characters in mythology, the treatment of upper caste Hindu widows and caste-based violence to state repression and 'sexual governance'. Having witnessed the violence of the Indian partition at a young age, she has always been deeply committed to democracy and involved in upholding the right to dissent. She has been a member of multiple fact-finding teams that have investigated communal riots and human rights violations in India; for example, the International Tribunal on Justice for Gujarat. Her books include *Rewriting history: the life and times of Pandita Ramabai*, *Everyday lives, everyday histories: beyond the kings and Brahmanas of 'ancient' India*, *The Delhi riots: three days in the life of a nation* and *Speaking peace: women's voices from Kashmir*. Her documentaries include *Fragments of a past*, *A quiet little entry* and *Ek inquilab aur aaya*.

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<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/priorities/internationaldevelopment/lgd/>

Introduction

RY: *You have consistently discussed structural inequality in your public talks. Could you tell me what kind of theoretical questions related to economic justice were taken up as a result of Indian academics' involvement in the women's movements in the 1970s and the 1980s?*

UC: If we go back to the pre-neoliberal phase in India, the women's movement was addressing structural inequality of the old, congealed kind, which had not been engaged with till then. When the women's movement began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a lot of movements were growing across the country. Actually movements had been growing since the Naxalite one in 1967¹ and women had been quite involved in that. Again, post-Emergency², there were lots of movements in which women were quite active. For instance, there was the peasant women's movement in Shahada in Maharashtra which had been quite strong. These were movements which *were* addressing questions of structural inequality and questions pertaining to the most marginalised women, like Adivasi women. So questions of

¹ The Naxalite movement was originally intended as an 'armed struggle' aimed at 'redistribution' of land and had begun in the village of Naxalbari in the state of West Bengal in India. It has had a long and complicated history and continues to impact parts of the country. Following links offer an understanding of the past and present of the movement:

<https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/government/naxalite-movement-in-india>
<https://www.dailyo.in/politics/naxalite-naxalbari-may-25-1967-charu-mazumdar-kanu-sanyal/story/1/17404.html>
<https://scroll.in/article/838441/the-naxal-movement-burst-to-life-50-years-ago-on-this-day-a-revolutionary-remembers-may-24-1967>
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/naxalbari-the-bengal-village-where-50-years-of-a-movement-is-celebrated/article18447130.ece>
<https://www.epw.in/maoist-movement-india>

(All links accessed: 4 Sep 2018. 20: 07.)

² 'Emergency' is the state of President's Rule under the Indian constitution; it allows the President to freeze the fundamental rights of Indian citizens alleging internal threats to India's security. In June 1975 the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, had declared Emergency in the country, which lasted till March 1977.

inequality had always been very important for various women's movements; and, at least, it was informed by the fact that there were many layers of inequality in our society. It was not simply a case of *our* issues...

RY: *Who do you mean by 'our'?*

UC: Metropolitan women in this case. For example, Mathura's rape, which was custodial rape in a police station, represented the power of the state against the *very* disempowered women (Mathura was an Adivasi woman). It was not an accident that it was Mathura who was raped.³ Or Ramiza Bi. People from the margins get raped in the *thana* (police station); metropolitan women might get raped elsewhere but not in a *thana*. Now Mathura's case was taken up by a women's group in Nagpur which was led by Seema Sakhare. This was unlike the dowry movement which was a metropolitan women's movement, and had emerged in Delhi and other urban areas. Similarly, the point of emergence for the LGBT movement was the metropolis, though, today, the issues and members come from across the board.

This understanding of differences among women and women being oppressed in multiple ways – class, caste or something else – was there in the women's movement; but there was more sensitivity to questions of class and work on caste and its relationship with class had not been done.

RY: *This work had not been done till the late 1970s?*

UC: See there had been a number of women in the Naxalite movement. So when the Emergency was lifted in 1977 and the Naxalite movement began to resurface a lot of the women from that movement were involved in the new, smaller women's movements which were very strongly focused on addressing inequalities inherited from the past. This past was not only the colonial one,

³ The rape of an Adivasi (tribal) woman, Mathura, in police custody in rural Uttar Pradesh in 1978 and the subsequent acquittal of her rapists led to protests by women's groups in India. These protests and an open letter by lawyer and scholar, Upendra Baxi, to three Supreme Court judges eventually also resulted in changes to rules regarding evidence in the prosecution of rape cases in Indian courts.

but also the pre-colonial one. We were all very familiar with traditional inequalities because of films and so on. The question of dowry violence which was a little bit more middle class and urban, only came second.

RY: *So, for example, in urban Madhya Pradesh – which is where I come from – dowry is a contemporary problem across boundaries of religion and caste. Was it like that?*

UC: When it first surfaced as an issue, it was a problem of the lower middle and upper classes. It was an urban issue and it was not a Dalit issue. But if you look at pamphlets that were produced during the Mathura campaign, the pamphlets actually talked about sexual violence against particular sections, and basically, those at the margins of society. There was that dimension to the women's movement which did not get picked up somehow.

RY: *You mean it did not get picked up politically? Or do you mean theoretically?*

UC: Well, in later writing. Somehow the questions around dowry violence led to other kinds of discussions and debates. There were groups of people who got together post the intervention in dowry violence and brought in [the issue of] domestic violence as it operated within marriage. That created space to talk about what was happening inside homes, behind closed doors. Lots of women would come and talk about the fact that they were being beaten up. This discussion of patriarchy as a violent expression of masculine power emerged as a powerful dimension of discussions in those groups. Thus, we could see a connection between violence in the lower middle class against the wife, or the daughter-in-law, over dowry, and domestic violence which was not around dowry but around patriarchal power.

RY: *And was this then connected up with other forms of violence like what happened to Mathura and with other structural inequalities?*

UC: It was moving [in that direction]. Structural inequality was seen as something that was in the public sphere whereas dowry-related and other domestic violence were happening in the domestic sphere. It is like this: even the better off

women do not have access to resources. Early academic work that Bina Agarwal⁴ did helps identify this. This lack of access to resources was actually brought up in the Bodhgaya movement too but in a different context. The women agricultural labourers in Bodhgaya (Bihar) argued that all their labour was consumed by the head of the household who seemed to think that the women did nothing. Agricultural labourers had been about to get land in their own names⁵ and these women demanded that women agricultural labourers should get it individually in their names. There was also a focus on inequality *between* classes and castes – because the Bodhgaya women were predominantly Dalits. Actually this was an interesting moment because these women were looking at structural inequality *as well as* inequality in the home in economic terms.

There was this famous poster which read, '*Meri biwi kaam nahi karti*' (my wife does not work). It is an inversion of Chandralekha's multi-armed goddess – Chandralekha was a version of 'Kali'.⁶ The poster turned this image around to discuss the domesticated woman at a workshop. There were actually ten arms attached to the body in the image to represent all the work that women do at home. The poster showed the woman cooking, bringing firewood, etcetera and where the uterus is, the poster had this text: '*bacche paida karna bhi kaam hai*' (bearing children is also work). Thus all aspects of domestic labour were presented. I

⁴ See Agarwal 1994.

⁵ The Bodhgaya Math, a 'Shaivite monastic institution', had grown and occupied several thousand acres of land around the Math during Mughal and British rule (Geary 2013, Alaka and Chetna 1987). While some of the land was distributed post-independence substantial portions continued to be under the Math's control till the 1970s. During the late 1970s and the early 1980s, agricultural labourers, under the leadership of the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, struggled successfully to get this land back. For further details, see Chhachhi and Pittin 2014.

Also see:

<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19801215-labourers-demand-share-to-the-crops-grown-on-landed-property-held-by-bodhgaya-mahant-773639-2013-11-30>

(Last accessed: 24 Oct 2018, 10:00)

⁶ Kali is a militant, dark, Indic mother goddess.

am struck by how rich the conceptualisation was and how much it owed itself to the interaction between middle class women and women who laboured outside the home in a variety of capacities. So you were also getting these accounts of women from the (socioeconomically) lowest sections.

The way I see it is that Bina Agarwal's demand that women should have access to resources was one side of it and the Bodhgaya movement was the other side of it. The women's movement was actually able to bring the two together in a very interesting move. That's why I feel that the Bodhgaya movement should actually be better disseminated. It was concerned with the rights of agricultural labourers whereas Bina Agarwal's scholarship was concerned with a larger range of social groups who had access to resources like land.

Bodhgaya was a movement of Dalit labourers, so it did not get the kind of attention and prestige that some other movements did. For example, the Chipko movement⁷ was seen as a non-class movement where the struggle was over what were seen as community resources; it did not entail class wars and redistribution. Women were seen as nurturing the environment and it was understood that it was their lives that were affected by state policy regarding forests; they had to go into the forest for fuel, etc. and so the burden of their labour went up if forests were destroyed. Chipko was a Gandhian movement as opposed to a militant one. And it was not challenging patriarchy; it was the 'outsider' that was the problem here, not the power that men exercised over women within the family. Similarly, the anti-*arrack* movement⁸ actually took on men

⁷ This was a movement led by women to prevent deforestation in parts of what is now the state of Uttarakhand (it was part of the state of Uttar Pradesh in the 1970s when the movement took place). For more details, see, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chipko-movement> and <https://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/what-is-the-chipko-movement-google-doodle-5111644/> (Accessed on: 4 Sep 2018, 19: 58.)

⁸ *Arrack* is a local variety of liquor in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The anti-*arrack* movement refers to the movement led by women's groups against the sale

who were 'outsiders'; though a fundamental reason women had begun to oppose liquor sale had been that alcoholism caused husbands to be even more violent. So since the Bodhgaya movement was a movement of Dalit women, was more militant and had more explicitly challenged patriarchy, it was not documented and circulated as much as it deserved to be.

This was a problem with India's women's movement: the divide between metropolitan women and rural women. For example, women's movements in Bihar did engage with the Bodhgaya movement but the *metropolitan* women's movement do/did not teach it or talk about it. I am being harsh but with good reason. The latter's understanding of class, caste, etc. is somewhat simplistic. Of course, some women in this group have a sharper understanding but the majority does not. Neither the media nor the historians of women's movements have picked up on it. The (dominant) histories tend to focus on just Delhi and Mumbai, for example, Raka Ray's book also does that. The anti-*arrack* movement was far more successful and yet, fails to get the academic and media attention it deserves. Similarly, in Hyderabad a large number of women struggled for land distribution in the late 1980s and early 1990s; I have found women who have been jailed several times as a result of their participation in such autonomous women's movements. In the case of the Bodhgaya movement, the theorising came from a student and youth movement called, the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* in Bihar; women like Kiran Shaheen and Manimala who were part of the old JP (Jay Prakash Narayan) movement, theorised what happened in Bodhgaya.

RY: *So where did all this lead to, in terms of theorisation of the question of economic justice for women?*

and consumption of *arrack* and other liquor; it had arisen in the context of the Total Literacy Mission launched by the government of India. For further details, see Saxena 2002 and Pappu 2002. Also see: <http://www.anveshi.org.in/broadsheet-on-contemporary-politics/broadsheet-on-contemporary-politics-vol-2-no-1011/anti-arrack-movement-prohibition-and-after-reenadu-strategic-support-and-silence/> (Last accessed on 4 Sep 2018, 20: 16).

UC: It was a simple account of women's labour being appropriated by others. It was feminist economics which may have resonances with ways of thinking in other parts of the world. But the way the Bodhgaya movement created political practice out of it, was far ahead of feminist theorising. Though Bina Agarwal did important work she did not discuss patriarchy and access to resources in precisely this way. The women in the Bodhgaya movement understood domestic violence and had already factored it in. They asked, 'when my husband has nothing he has so much power over me, when he gets the land how much more power will he get over me?'

RY: *If we forget about disciplinary boundaries what kind of theoretical engagement have you seen with questions of economic justice in the last forty years?*

UC: There have been many struggles around the question of control over various means of production, for example, the fish workers' movement. Women have been at the forefront of those struggles some of which have been theorised as well. For instance, Iliana Sen's edited collection, *A space within the struggle*, is a marvellous account of what different locations produce in the way of economic and political struggles and also how different groups of women understand power. However, I do not think we have adequately systematised the theory that people's movements have been able to generate from practice. That is one of the quarrels that I have with the way the women's movement has gone.

RY: *So, if there have always been multiple movements why are we calling it 'the' women's movement?*

UC: 'The women's movement' is the name given to the larger set of autonomous women's movements in the country and which largely followed the Mathura movement. In dominant narratives in the public sphere and in most of academic and popular writing and university curricula, however, the understanding of this movement remains limited to struggles and issues of metropolitan women. It is not understood in its totality. Rural women, for example, fought in different ways and had different concerns. A

wonderful example of this was the way rural women working as *Sathins* in Rajasthan (between 1986 and 1992-1993) developed a critique of the state and its family planning programme.⁹ Of course, some feminist academics' politics emerged from their participation in the women's movement and their critical grasp of a range of issues and recognition of a range of women's groups is reflected in their own writing and teaching. For example, Nandini Manjrekar, Sadhna Saxena are such academics.

However, more generally, our understanding is limited to metropolitan women's struggles and any movements that do not fit into this understanding are ignored. We have failed to attend to the fact that activism on the ground is much richer than our theorisation so far. For example, there is Sundari:¹⁰ she is extraordinary! She is a fisherwoman and an activist in the Kudankulam anti-nuclear movement. If we do not engage with this movement how will we know what, or how, Sundari thinks? Of course, she is not waiting for us to understand and write about her. She has written her own book in Tamil (*The Fiery Struggle of Idinthakarai*).

RY: *This academic work was done after the late 1980s?*

UC: Definitely. Much later. By the time we began

⁹ A *sathin* is the elected representative of women in every *Panchayat* of the state of Rajasthan in India and is elected by the women's *Gram Sabha* (village committee). The *sathins* were engaged in a radical *sathin* programme during mid-1980s and early 1990s; they also attended the Calicut Conference (mentioned elsewhere in this interview) and were the life of that conference. Eventually their programme was transformed into a regular government programme that lost its critical edge.

¹⁰ For more on the movement and Sundari, please see, <https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-intrepid-women-vs-goliath-2237083> (Accessed: 15 Feb 2019) <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/kudankulam-nuclear-plant-protest-sedition-supreme-court-of-india-section-124a-3024655/>. (Accessed: 27 Aug 2018) Also see: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/dissent-diary-the-women-protesting-the-kudankulam-power-plant-are-chronicled-in-a-new-book-2695570.html>. (Accessed: 27 Aug 2018)

to produce academic work, it was the late 1980s, event mid-1990s. I see Sangari and Vaid's 'Recasting Women' — it came out in 1989 — as the major moment of thinking about structures in a historical context. The introduction to that book is marvellous. And then other scholarship started coming afterwards.

RY: *So clearly feminist theorising was being led by the women's movement.*

UC: There was no question that it wasn't being led by the women's movement! We did not see ourselves as academics. We had one foot in academia and the other in activism. I was pushed to look at history from a feminist angle. I was told: "please go back and don't come to any more of these demonstrations. Take leave and go back and tell us what is there in our culture that says that when a woman gets married she goes out and even her (dead) body should not come back." Because I was an historian of early Indian history.

RY: *Who did this demand come from? From the women who were protesting?*

UC: The women who were protesting: they were so furious! Women had no escape from marriage. Nobody cared what happened to them after marriage. In my first feminist piece I wrote about 'Sita'. It had come out of the question of the right to live, and to live with dignity. Women saw that as something that was missing in our culture. This kind of questioning shows how feminist theorising was led by women's activism.

RY: *But more needs to be done in terms of theoretical engagement?*

UC: Oh, a lot more! That generation of women activist-academics did a lot of such work. For example, there is Radha Kumar's book on factory workers; there was a lot of work on factory workers.

RY: *But after that? It has been one more generation?*

UC: That is true. It's a lack. Let me put it this way: for example, if feminist academics want to understand what is happening with unorganised labourers they will go and look at SHGs (self-help groups) rather than [at] the actual conditions of women workers and how they struggle or survive. To some extent, it is also the imperative of

critiquing neoliberalism that drives you to look at SHGs but the fact is that they need to question the production system. The kind of work that Maria Mies¹¹ did, where she looks at the women lace-makers of Narsapur, has disappeared. For example, in India we have women working from home in multiple industries today and for a while, some feminist scholars did focus on the nature of this new production system and the kind of self-exploitation that happens in this context. They looked at who got the money and so on. Till I was teaching in Wardha, that generation of students was still looking at these questions.

RY: *When was this?*

UC: Up till 2006. My students were looking at glassmakers and so on. This kind of work has gone out completely in "First world" universities. Because we are all doing intersectionality, intersectionality, intersectionality. In *theory*. We are not doing it in practice! That is, we don't use it in the way we write about the women's movement [in India]; we have begun to use the categories "dalit" or "gay" and the term, "multiplicity" in a routine way; but these have not helped evolve the way we *think* of inequality.

We have dropped the economic questions. We are aware of the fact of structural adjustment and that neoliberalism has been a new onslaught upon us (the "third world"). Some work was being done on the new kinds of exploitation but even that has stopped. For example, I am not seeing much work on feminisation of poverty any more. What is being engaged, to some extent, is the attack on the Adivasi lands, and the protest movements in Chhattisgrah. These are not (just) radical Left movements; in fact, the bulk of these are not [associated with] Left movements, for example, Soni Sori's struggle is not.

RY: *Even this work is not very substantial, the focus is not systematic.*

UC: No, it isn't. We have allowed economic questions to drop. Somewhere along the line, questions of identity have come to dominate *outside of* questions of poverty and inequality. But there are also a number of scholars who have sustained their focus [on economic questions].

¹¹ See Mies 2014.

And these scholars wrote about the smaller struggles of people who would not otherwise have been looked at. So it is important that Nalini Nayak and others have written these accounts of fish workers' struggles or women's participation in Kudankulam. Kudankulam is not an economic question, it's a huge political question.

RY: *You said¹² that people claim there is no women's movement any longer. But that's not really true. There is a multiplicity of movements, isn't there?*

UC: Absolutely. It's gone to different places.

RY: *So, both, women's role in movements and the status of the question of women's rights, are different now?*

UC: Yes. The earlier women's movement has gone to different places. Gone into different locations and the media is not interested in that. For instance, when in 2016 we marked thirty years of 'Saheli'¹³, which is an autonomous women's group in Delhi, there was a big event. They are invested in the political and economic aspects of the question of gender and had assembled a very interesting collection of people from Kashmir and many other places. For example, they had Sundari. Her formulation of the issues is based on her experiences. Apparently, she was not bothered about Kudankulam till she saw Fukushima on TV; and then she said to herself, 'hey, this can happen to us! It happened there and they have so many cars and so many means of escape. We don't have a single car in this village! Where will we go? How will we get out of here?' And she is now a full time member of the movement against the Kudankulam nuclear plant. Yet, what is striking is that no media persons came to do interviews with her when she was at the event.

RY: *Maybe not "national" media but perhaps local media had come?*

UC: But my question is why not Delhi-based media outlets? Media is only interested in the gender question in a limited sense. Not in the [entire] range of things I am talking about.

¹² This is a reference to the talk Uma Chakravarti gave at the University of Warwick in June 2017.

¹³ 'Saheli' is the Hindi word for a girl or woman friend.

RY: *They are only interested in the 'pink-ribbon'¹⁴ version of gender issues!*

UC: Yes, it has been totally domesticated, or sanitized in some ways. Media was never interested. Why else would we not know about Bodhgaya?

RY: *So these smaller struggles are not visible precisely because these are about structural inequality and women's economic rights and the media is not interested in these questions.*

UC: See, the media is the least idealistic segment of our society at the moment. Media has dropped poverty. Media has dropped inequality. They only show what the middle and upper-middle classes want to see, that is, stories of their own upward mobility. These sections do not actually care about all the other people left down below. If you are hungry or something they don't want to hear that story. Look at the way the Tamil Nadu farmers had to struggle [in 2016] ...

RY: *...they came up with all sorts of innovative ways to make themselves visible and were still unable to get a response out of the government.*

UC: So who is genuinely interested in questions of land, or, questions of Adivasi groups? Sometimes the media can get an iconic figure and they will pick her up and write about her. But they are not interested in the questions of survival that face the large mass of our people. 'Do they go to bed hungry?' 'Not interested.'

RY: *In one of your talks you have spoken about new media and alternate media. Can you trace that history a little bit? How did it begin to have an impact on public discourses?*

UC: In the early stages when the women's movement started off, the immediate response of young documentary filmmakers was quite significant.

¹⁴ The reference is to the 'Race for Cancer' campaign for raising awareness of breast cancer in the USA. Klawiter (1999: 110) notes that different kinds of campaigns ('walk', 'race' and 'tour') corresponded to different kinds of women and cultural politics. She argues that the 'Race for Cancer' and the pink ribbon that symbolises it, represented 'white, heterosexual, middle-class, consumerized femininity.'

RY: *Is this the 1970s that you are talking about?*

UC: No. It is the 1980s... it was probably even early 1990s by the time they started making films. The first film that came out was on dowry violence. Meera Dewan had made it. It is not a well-made film; actually there are ethical questions because it involved a woman making some sort of a dying declaration on camera. It is under twenty minutes and I showed it in my classes at Miranda House¹⁵. I would particularly bring up films that our own ex-students had made and Meera Dewan had been our student. Then there is a wonderful film made by two women on the Calicut Conference in 1994, of which, only a very bad copy remains available. This was a conference attended by women across the country discussing a wide range of issues. It's a marvellous film because it captures the energy of the women's movement. It shows the singing, the dancing and the sessions that were conducted on domestic violence, problems faced by single women and questions of sexuality.

I did a workshop three years ago and during that I could actually map the way some young filmmakers had responded to the women's movement and the films that they had made: one movie was on the anti-dowry movement, one more on *sati*, and so on. There were some good media pieces and some good feminist writers. For example, Kalpana Sharma goes back a long time, and Ammu Joseph: both were women journalists and products of the women's movements. Even before that, in the early 1980s, Neerja Chowdhury had been there. All these people wrote on the entire range of issues we have been discussing. But what I find problematic is that we do not have systematic documentation of these pieces. I cannot think of any such collection. By now you could have done an edited volume of all the early pieces that these women wrote. It would be interesting to see what they wrote about, what they were responding to.

You see, academic work is, by definition, documented. So there is a record. And some of the journalists and writers have also written books. For example, Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma did a book, *Whose news? The media and women's issues*, at one point; similarly, Sevanti

¹⁵ A college in Delhi affiliated to the Delhi University.

Ninan has done an interesting book on the Hindi heartland, *Headlines from the heartland: reinventing the Hindi public sphere*. But what would also be interesting now is to take the best pieces written by young women in newspapers around that time and create an archive. Today it would be a great resource. Since there is no such archive, there is memory loss in the public sphere. How will the younger generation know anything about any of the earlier feminist work?

Today, the media do not look at it; and we do not have a story of how the media looked at it at earlier. What did they do and what did they fail to do? I think this is an important issue.

RY: *You have already given me some contemporary examples like the Kudankalam movement and there is also the Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA). What are some of the movements that have been able to sustain themselves over a long period of time? When some people say that there is no women's movement I think they are also saying that movements are not able to sustain themselves. Do you think that is a problem?*

UC: I don't think it is like that. See, we are not putting up a political party. So we have to reproduce ourselves individually and as collectives and through the range of issues that we take up. And a fairly wide range of issues is taken up. Whether it is the queer feminist movement, whether it's Dalit feminists, or the strong feminist thrust of the disability movement; none of these would be possible if the women's movement were actually dying. Like I said, the women's movement has just gone in different directions, to different locations. Perhaps the level of visibility that we may have had in and around Delhi, or Mumbai, has gone down. If you look at who is engaging and with what issues they are engaging, you will see what is different today; *but you will also see that it exists.*

For example, you can look at Sharifa Khanum's work¹⁶ on women's *jamaats* or at Deepa Dhanraj's

¹⁶ Sharifa Khanam is a Tamil Nadu based activist who has been fighting for Muslim women's rights in legal and social arenas, particularly, through establishment of women's *jamaats* and efforts to build a mosque for

films. Deepa Dhanraj has engaged with everything that she possibly could; she has written on Indira Gandhi's erstwhile population policy and made a fantastic film on it, called, *Something like a War*. There was also Nupur Basu's film on the anti-arrack movement, *Dry days in Dobbagunta...* and Shabnam Virmani also made a movie on it. But these movies dealt with the movement without looking at its genesis in the TLM (Total Literacy Mission), the textbooks used in the programme or women's discussions around the learning material. So some of these moments have been mapped, though not always adequately.

Then again, the contemporary metropolitan women's movement may or may not be interested in these movements. There is a liveliness to the women's movement. There is no way we can say that it is not there. Today it is difficult to demarcate the urban... but it is the bigger cities and metropolises that fail to engage with ground realities. One cannot accuse, for example, the Lucknow women's movement of not responding to the situation on the ground. Even Chennai has that tendency. But Delhi, Mumbai, etc. have changed. Now the Dalit women's movement has made a huge impact and they have accused these metropolitan groups of not being bothered about events like Khairlanji¹⁷.

women in TN. A *jamaat* is an organisation; in this case, an 'all-women organisation' for Muslim women which 'emerged in response to allegations of chauvinism, corruption and abuse of power in the traditional, and all-male, Muslim *jamaats*.' (*Livemint*, 15 Feb 2014). For further details, see,

<https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/1R2rO5eWbRzZdDbqUsxWXI/Deepa-Dhanraj--Justice-league.html>

(Accessed on: 4 Sep 2018, 20: 49.)

¹⁷ On 29 Sep 2006 four members of a Dalit family – Surekha Bhotmange, her daughter Priyanka and Surekha's two sons, Roshan and Sudhir – were brutally assaulted and killed by Maratha-Kunbi villagers in Khairlanji village in Maharashtra. The two women were stripped, paraded naked and raped multiple times while the entire village watched and encouraged the perpetrators. Surekha's husband, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange, who was away from home and thus survived the incident, fought for eleven years till his death in 2017 for justice for his family. For details, see:

<https://navayana.org/blog/2017/01/22/the-entire->

And see, it is also related to what is – and isn't – taught in college classrooms. If you do not teach about Sharifa Khanum's work and if you do not show Deepa Dhanraj's films, students will not really know what kind of theory the women's movement generated or what interventions it made. One of the lesser known stories is that of the population question and the question of women's health. These stories are less well-known than the first moment that consisted of the anti-dowry struggle and so on. Even something like Iliana Sen's book, '*A Space within a Struggle...*', is now something from the past. It's of an earlier time. She has now produced a second volume of that book which maps the range of issues with which the women's movement has engaged. Because it is important for us to document what various movements are doing at this point in time. If we don't document it, it won't get taught in feminist and women's studies courses, even in social sciences. For example, after neoliberalisation things have changed from what was happening earlier in the 1980s and 1990s – now it is about land struggles. Now there is an Emergency-like situation because of the aggression of predatory capital in Adivasi areas of Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and parts of Madhya Pradesh. Then there are issues like the Sterlite protest in Thoothukudi¹⁸ which are about the wellbeing of communities being affected.

[village-was-involved-sir-entire-village-bhaiyalal-bhotmange/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/09/29/a-decade-since-the-khairlanji-massacre-theres-been-no-let-up-i-a-21483135/)

(Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17:07.)

<https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/09/29/a-decade-since-the-khairlanji-massacre-theres-been-no-let-up-i-a-21483135/> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17: 07).

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(Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17: 08).

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/khairlanji-kopardi-rape-case-maratha-protests-3053443/> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17: 08).

¹⁸ Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu was the site of intense protests against the expansion of a copper smelter of Vedanta's Sterlite Copper unit. Vedanta is a mining giant and its Sterlite unit has been accused by activists and communities in Thoothukudi of contaminating air and water resources and severely impacting the health of the community. In May 2018 thirteen people died as

But I don't think questions around material reality have been dropped in the women's movement, not even among groups who do single access lobbying. For example, the queer movement is very aware that there are other movements that raise economic or other questions. The material inequality is so palpable that for any movement to sustain itself, it has to engage with questions of material survival.

RY: *And there are always individuals who participate simultaneously in movements based on questions of identity as well as redistribution. For example, there are people who are part of both, the queer movement and the farmer's movement in Karnataka.*

UC: And even though there have been lots of wars and passionate debates between Dalit feminists and others, the struggle to build solidarities and develop a vision which can simultaneously address different people's oppressions is not something we have given up on. For example, there are people working on gender and caste who used to see the queer movement as a middle class, "western" issue. But eventually that changed. These people began to understand that you cannot write off anyone's oppression. Some of these people even came for one of the sessions opposing Section 377¹⁹ and spoke there. Such

a result of police firing on the protestors. For further details, see:

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2018/jun/23/none-held-accountable-for-thoothukudi-firing-which-claimed-13-lives-1832394.html> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17:16).
<https://scroll.in/article/880076/the-daily-fix-why-were-police-shooting-to-kill-anti-sterlite-protestors-in-thoothukudi> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17:16).
<https://scroll.in/article/874441/every-house-has-a-sick-person-why-people-in-tuticorin-are-opposing-vedantas-copper-smelter> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17:17).
<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/entirely-preventable/article23971795.ece> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17:17).
<https://thewire.in/environment/in-thoothukudi-the-choice-before-people-was-to-die-of-cancer-or-bullets> (Last accessed: 17 Oct 2018, 17:18).

¹⁹ Section 377 is part of the Indian Penal Code and criminalises homosexuality. In a landmark judgment in

dialogue and open discussions helps us advance our own thinking and further our analyses; and if these can be sustained then we will ultimately be able to build some solidarities.

RY: *So you are saying that there is a divergence; feminist scholarship has gone in a slightly different direction with postmodernism and poststructuralism whereas people's movements have gone in another direction? That the relationship between feminist academia and activism was much more solid in 1970s than it is now?*

UC: If you look at some individual scholars' work you will see that they have managed to sustain their work. Take Bina Agarwal; she continues to work on economic questions and women's rights to economic resources. Look at Kumkum Sangari; she started off with 'Recasting Women' and then did very brilliant work on *sati*²⁰ and its revival in the 1980s²¹. She has looked at the 19th century as the formative phase [of raising the women's question] and also looked at the whole range of issues which dominated our understanding at that time, for example, women's education, or their right to speak for themselves. Kumkum has also done a book on new reproductive technologies like surrogacy. So there were dramatically different issues to be raised at each point of time but these were all fundamentally about women's situation and status.

Surrogacy is an important issue to analyse, particularly, the political economy of surrogacy. But it's not seen as a political economy question. If at all there is anger and annoyance about it, it is from a nationalist perspective. Even the most right-wing nationalists are quite happy with new reproductive technologies because these bring in money. So, at the end of the day, money determines everything. I have sometimes said, 'we are so nationalist about everything, how come we are not nationalist about our wombs?' There are also class and caste dynamics to it. This is not the absolutely poor women, but the lower middle

2018 the Supreme Court of India struck this section down.

²⁰ The practice of widow burning among some upper caste communities in north and western India.

²¹ See Vaid and Sangari 1991.

class; and the woman's womb is being used [commercially] so that her biological children can have a better life. It is a complicated issue. Like there is this relationship between dowry violence and sex selective abortion in India. Similarly, there is a biological angle to surrogacy which reduces women to their wombs. Women are reified as wombs.

In addition to these issues, there has also been a lot of work on caste in the later phase of the women's movement.

RY: *When you say later, when do you mean?*

UC: 1990s to 2000s... 1994 is when I wrote *Reconceptualising gender: Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical patriarchy*²²; it came on the heels of the anti-Mandal movement²³ and then I wrote *Gendering Caste* in 2002 or 2003. Sharmila Rege also did important work on caste which took us in a different direction. We were looking at the political economy, culture, and caste-based exploitation and trying to theorise intersections of class and caste. A lot of this work was happening for the first time then.

RY: *What is the state of engagement of contemporary feminist academics with movements like the one in Kudankulam or organisations like the BMMA?*

UC: Well, yes, there is a divide... Our generation was one that had one foot in academia and one in feminist activism, but that is not necessarily so now for many feminist academics.

RY: *The intimacy is not there..?*

UC: It's there and it's not there. It's there in places like Pune but less so in places like Delhi, Mumbai

²² See Chakravarti 1996.

²³ The anti-Mandal protest was a movement led largely by upper caste students to oppose the recommendations and implementation of the Mandal Commission report (also called the Social and Educationally Backward Classes Commission). The Commission recommended expanding caste-based reservation in public sector jobs to castes identified as Other Backward Classes, in addition to that for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India. For further details on the commission and the anti-Mandal protests, see Chakravarti 2009, Deshpande 2014, Thorat and Newman 2012.

or Kolkata. *Fine* scholarship coming out but not necessarily engaged with the big movements.

RY: *What do we lose politically and theoretically when that happens?*

UC: It depends on how you work at it, right? For example, Kavita Panjabi has done a beautiful book on the Tebhaga movement. She brought in the question of women's role in Left movements. She has done a very fine analysis. Now, I think, it's not going to get read by those who were part of the movement because those questions have gone. Now there are different questions on the ground. But a history of things is being lost [if we do not write about such movements]. We have dropped certain phases completely; certain histories of women's participation in broader political struggles. For example, there is Kotteshwaramma who was in the Telangana movement²⁴; she went to jail and saw the left movement collapsing and she is utterly feminist! She refused to be obliterated by her own personal circumstances...

Now we are the intermediate generation; the earlier generation was represented by Neera Desai, Veena Majumdar, etc. and the contemporary generation is the *Pinjra Tod*, MeToo and so on. It is up to us to record that history but we are not looking at the legacy of the activism which started in 1946, went into the Telangana movement, or into the communist movement. We have come to the Naxalite movement now. But the current generation of students, young women or activists also often do not know these histories. Till early 2000's there was not such a disconnect. But since the mid-1990's, when the neoliberal phase began, there is a new generation of students and activists who do not know any of the post-independence history and therefore, do not know the roots of our political engagement, or the relationship between academic and activist work. For example, that relationship evolved into the Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS) conferences. There was no question of activists not going to IAWS conferences! Questions regarding caste and gender are there in our [university] syllabus. But these discussions are not

²⁴ The book, *We were Making History*, was written on the movement by the collective, *Stree Shakti Sangathana*.

part of students' experience of activism. But now, in the second decade of this century a new generation of students and activists is coming back to some of these experiences.

And I think, in some places, activists are still going to IAWS conferences. It is difficult to generalise; for example, in Mumbai sections of activists are still going. That way the Tata Institute of Social Sciences is interesting. The 'activist slash academic' is still there. Meena Gopal and Nandini Manjrekar are people who are engaged with writing but they are also in the movement. They are not outside of the movement. Participation depends on how much you are able to read, write and go to smaller politically active groups and talk to them. That has not gone away completely.

RY: *Is it also happening because it is now harder to do these things on college and university campuses? Is there more policing by right-wing groups or institutes themselves?*

UC: No. No. No. It's not because of the policing. It's the academics who have put themselves into a corner. In the women's or anti-caste movements, people don't have a problem speaking. Actually I would like to see how the RSS²⁵ would respond to Sundari's perspective on Kudankulam.

RY: *And the ABVP²⁶?*

UC: But the ABVP won't be able to oppose movements like Kudankulam that easily. They can do it for Kashmir. But not for Kudankulam. Sundari's formulation is fantastic. When Manmohan Singh²⁷ came and said, there is no danger to it and it is perfectly safe, Sundari asked, "if it's so safe why don't they put it in front of the Parliament?" I don't think the ABVP can label her anti-national for that. But interestingly, the

Congress²⁸ was able to do that. They slapped some three hundred cases of sedition against her. ABVP hooliganism is definitely there but they are not going to bother about the [impact of the] women's movement. What's the women's movement [they will ask]? They will say, "we can marshal lakhs of women to speak on our behalf, about Hindutva." At the moment, they are more bothered about history, nationalism, nationality, border issues and so on. I think the women's movement has not become big enough to be a danger to them. Actually that tells us that issues like the right to marriage or the right to choice need to be articulated more sharply and consistently. It does happen sometimes; for example, Indira Jaisingh provided a perfect formulation of what happened with Hadiya/Akhila.²⁹

RY: *You mentioned in your talk at Warwick (June 2017) that many scholars are more concerned with colonial history and critiques of the colonial nation-state than with that of the post-colonial state. Were you referring to the subaltern studies group?*

UC: Yes, I was. Very much so. After that talk a South African woman came and said to me that the colonial state and history were still very relevant to them. I agree with her because in South Africa there has been no real transfer of power and the Whites continue to have a tight grip on the economy and though it's not done formally, apartheid continues to be upheld. But it is different in India. We threw the colonisers out

²⁵ Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a powerful right-wing, Hindu nationalist organisation in India.

²⁶ Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad; it is the student wing of the Bhartiya Janata Party. Since the BJP came to power in Delhi in 2014 the ABVP has been involved in several incidents of aggression against students challenging gender, religion and caste-based marginalisation and oppression.

²⁷ Dr. Manmohan Singh is a former Prime Minister of India.

²⁸ Indian National Congress. The INC-led coalition, United Progressive Alliance, was in power with Manmohan Singh at the helm from 2004 to 2014 at the centre.

²⁹ Hadiya is a young woman from Kerala who converted to Islam in her twenties. At the age of twenty-six years, she also chose a Muslim man as her husband. However, her family and the Kerala High Court questioned her right to choose her husband without her family's intervention and the court annulled her marriage. In March 2018 the Supreme Court of India finally reversed this judgment and upheld Hadiya's freedom to choose her partner. For details, see: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/big-win-freedom-choice-sc-upholds-hadiya-and-shafin-s-marriage-77632> (Last accessed: 4 Sep 2018, 23: 35).

and then we invited them back with neoliberal policies. So, at the end of the day, why do we continue to just focus on colonial rule?

Someone at SOAS³⁰ told me that they need to still hold on to that critique because the White kids in class do not understand it. But my life and work is in India and, beyond a point, I am not going to bother about the problems that the “First World” university system confronts. For me, it is more important to ensure that my society and state are not responsible for creating repressive mechanisms. As a person who lives in today’s India I must engage with the question of [upholding our] Constitutional values. Otherwise, I am no use as an historian or a political scientist. So my hit was at the Post-colonial studies group and I am happy with the theorists who are not writing about that. It makes me very angry that I have to read Agamben in order to understand the repressive Indian state. It is the job of Indian political scientists to develop critiques of the post-independence Indian state.

RY: *Rajni Kothari was doing this kind of work, wasn’t he?*

UC: But he stopped with criticising the Congress. My question is, how have we engaged with the last 20-25 years’ history of the repressive Indian state? Why are we not writing about that? I was glad that finally Partha Chatterjee spoke on the Indian state (on the Kashmir issue). Though it meant that he got into a controversy.³¹

RY: *One of the damages the British imperative for administration did was that it froze social categories; does this history have implications for our understanding of gender and caste today?*

UC: Yes. And no. This leads to a position where we start saying that the British created the caste system...

RY: *But they didn’t.*

UC: I know. But it’s easy to slide off into that argument and say that. We have a long precolonial history. Why does my history have to

start with colonial India?

RY: *Or end with it?*

UC: As an historian I understand that caste was being discussed in 6th century BC. So it is difficult to accept arguments saying that the British came and created caste. The fact is that, up until a certain point, allowing caste dynamics to operate discretely was actually quite practical and sensible as far as the British were concerned. They did not care what the actual practices were like, whether a community ate beef or not. The middle class, upper caste intelligentsia began to care when they homogenised themselves and they wanted the upper caste Brahmanical attitudes to go down all the way. It is important to understand history as a dynamic system but also that institutions like those of caste have always been oppressive. This is something we must acknowledge. Caste-based oppression may not always have had the same form and, of course, *jati* was a fluid system.

For example, if you look at the Rakhma Bai case³², one of her arguments was that, ‘we have the concept of divorce in our community, so how can this man demand restitution of conjugal rights and expect that he is going to live with me or force himself upon me?’. The British were embarrassed about it, but so were the Brahmanical Hindus; the latter were furious about it. They did not care that that man was a *sutar*; Rakhma bai was a *sutar* which was an OBC³³ caste. But, in the new efforts to homogenise Indians, people like Tilak were getting very excited. Their core paradigms were

³² Rakhma Bai was married to a nineteen-year old man when she was eleven-years old. When she entered puberty at age 12 she refused to go and live with her husband and her family supported her decision. Eventually there was a long drawn-out court case and public debates resulting in the Age of Consent Act, 1891. While the courts upheld Rakhma Bai’s marriage, Queen Victoria dissolved the marriage and Rakhma Bai continued her education. For a detailed and nuanced discussion, see, Tanika Sarkar’s *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2000). For a summary Rakhma Bai’s story, see this news report:

<https://www.ndtv.com/education/google-doodle-on-rukhamabai-raut-how-her-quest-for-education-led-to-age-of-consent-act-1891-1778576> (Last accessed: 4 Sep 2018, 23: 54).

³³ Other Backward Classes.

³⁰ School of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of London.

³¹ <http://pulsemedia.org/2015/09/10> (Last accessed on 17.10.2018; 17: 21).

women like Savitri who were idealised for even following a dying or dead husband so how could Rakhma Bai refuse to live with her husband?

There were limitations to the British willingness to intervene in social systems like caste. Yes, of course, there were interventions and those of us working on gender and caste have willingly drawn upon that because it gave us some power. At the end of the day, the caste system has survived and it has remained a very oppressive system. So a Maang (a former untouchable community) woman like Mukta Bai will talk about the Peshwai and point out that it was a horribly oppressive system. I cannot accept arguments like those made by Ashis Nandy which say that the British created caste.

RY: *Then instead of being seen as the only determinant of our present, colonial rule has to be understood and engaged with as a moment in history and as exemplifying the way relations and institutions shift form.*

UC: And to what extent do they fail to change. There is a famous essay on caste written by N Waghle in the 1920s. It looks at an instance of the British refusing to intervene in a caste dispute. This was a very important moment because at this point the legitimacy and power of the Hindu state had been withdrawn. But it is not as if the British were very egalitarian. They often refused to use their power to intervene in the internal conversations and confrontations of the caste system. They reckoned that ultimately the group of people demanding rights for themselves had to sort it out, whereas, earlier, the Peshwai might have stuck its nose in the business because as the ruling group, they would have been interested in upholding Brahmanical power.

RY: *Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that the state-society relationship was different before colonial rule and before Indian became a nation-state. What did that mean for caste relations?*

UC: The state was always interested in [upholding] the caste system. For example, there is a Japanese scholar, Fukazawa, who has done interesting work on the Peshwai³⁴. In one of my articles I have also discussed the fact the highest rates of suicides

was found among Brahmin women³⁵. After all, the burden of policing lay maximally with the upper caste woman. She had no exit except committing suicide. Equally, they were ensuring that the caste relations were maintained.

The state-society relationship varied depending on whether the group in power was Brahmans, OBCs or anyone else. Fact of the matter remains that the state has always been interested in the caste system.

RY: *Was it not because caste also determined who got to rule?*

UC: Or it could bestow legitimacy. One could appropriate power and then call themselves a Kshatriya. That is what Shivaji did.

RY: *Let me go back to your argument that political and social scientists should systematically develop a critique of the way the nation state has operated in post-liberalisation India. Do you think that because of globalisation the nation-state is being seen as less important? This is an argument offered by economists, development studies scholars and educationists internationally. Might that be a reason there is so little scholarship critiquing the nation state in neoliberal India?*

UC: That must be an important idea in the West. I do not think it is there in that form in India. In India, there is a powerful understanding of what is happening on the ground as a result of the new economic moves made globally and, in particular, locally. But the questions is: why is there so little theorisation of new structures of power, especially, around the question of nationalism? Yes, colonialism created multiple problems but we now need to focus on developing systematic understanding of contemporary state structures and what these are doing to various marginalised groups. We need to theorise why anyone interrogating the contemporary Indian nation-state faces brutal repression.

The current status of the relationship between nationalism and neoliberal economics is striking. It seems that our scholars view nationalism as a phenomenon that we dealt with in the colonial period and now it is no longer relevant. The first

³⁴ See Fukazawa 1991.

³⁵ See Chakravarti 2001.

thing that many post-independence states did was to respond to the economic needs of historically marginalised sections. One may lambast Nehru as much as they like but he attempted through policies such as the Five Year Plans and land reforms to remedy structural inequalities. At the end of the day, it was a failed venture because it did not lead to massive structural changes. And before that could be achieved we have entered the neoliberal phase. Thus immediately after independence our nationalism ensured that we focused on our people and on industrial development through protective mechanisms. The state engaged in massive industrialisation under Nehru and prevented foreign capital from coming in. Part of this nationalist consciousness was also the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

All of that has been chucked out now and with neoliberalism we are actually inviting foreign investments and control and opening up our borders economically. The push for such moves has come from international sources and our own debt crises. It has been compounded by the desire of certain sections of our society to be upwardly mobile. What we now have is extremely predatory capitalism and what is happening, for instance, in the entire Adivasi belt in central India is exploitation of our natural resources. These were actually among the things that were not in the hands of the middle class. These resources were either under state control or under that of the people.

RY: *It is the state that is inviting....*

UC: Yes, it is the state that is inviting this multinational and corporate capita into India. And the middle classes benefit through employment with these companies: their purchasing power improves and they are able to access expensive lifestyles. But Adivasi people were actually working and living on those lands. Their entire means of subsistence are being damaged under this onslaught by international capital. Where is your *economic* nationalism if today you are actually quite happy to have yourself exploited in the most aggressive ways? I will come back to this in a minute... The point is that the Indian state was never in welfare; it never got down to really solving the problems of structural inequality and

has now completely retreated because that is how it is supposed to be under neoliberalism. We are retreating from the people. We have nothing, now, for them. Programmes like the NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) are attacked viciously by neoliberal economists and media analysts. Tavleen Singh, for example, gets hysterical about the NREGS.

Yet, predatory capitalism cannot enter a country without the state actually being strong. The state is not weak. It is only retreating from certain obligations. The state is strong and it is coercive. There is no disbanding of the army and the police. The *hard* state structure has stayed. This hard structure is absolutely necessary because predatory capitalism cannot enter areas like central India – because there is so much resistance – without this backing of the Indian state. The Indian state is absolutely necessary for multinational companies to come in. So what is happening? The Dalits have always been landless. But the Adivasis did have land. That is the difference between the Dalits and the Adivasis – the Dalits never had resources. The Adivasis had resources which they were sitting on. They are now being pushed out and forced to become displaced, migrant labour. But they are attached to their way of life and so they resist. And the greater the resistance the more vicious the attack from the state.

So how do you understand nationalism in such a situation? For the new right-wing nationalists, it is perfectly alright to have massive exploitation of some sections of people. All they want to do is to maintain their “culture” and their right to proclaim, ‘we were the best in the world at one point in the past’, that ‘we are the indigenous people, the Aryans never came from outside; the Aryans were always here.’ They make these kinds of rhetorical claims but do not care that there is exploitation. Thus there is complete investment in the new economy and in the new, hard, militarised state structures. I think the new alliance is between USA, Israel and India...

RY: *Which is very scary.*

UC: It is totally scary. But that is the package that we are now invested in. We want to be [a] hard [state]. We want to have a strong military.

Everything that is happening in the country now stems from that desire.

RY: *So that is the kind of loss of historical consciousness to which you referred in the talk at Warwick?*

UC: It is a handling of historical consciousness that disallows recent history. Why is Nehru targeted so much these days by the ruling dispensation? Not only because the Indian National Congress is part of the Nehruvian dynasty. Fair enough. I have no problems with criticisms of dynastic rule in democracies. But the current government are also attacking the political and economic efforts made under Nehru to address historical inequalities. Those efforts may have failed; I don't think the Nehruvian state went far enough anyway. But I don't want the state to go right-wing either.

RY: *Instead it would seem that Nehruvian discourses needed to be sharpened, further developed.*

UC: Yes, and you have to solve the problems of the people on the ground. There is still lack of education; if you look at what's happening in many of the villages in Bihar – where Anand, my partner, has been doing some research – the lives of the underclass remain completely bogged down in abject poverty. They are unable to even physically reproduce themselves because there is no food and, no healthcare. Healthcare-related expenses are a big drain on families. Whatever resources a family may have, go into that.

I think, perhaps, this generation of feminists – I wouldn't say all kinds of feminists – but many of the urban feminists really do not have any understanding of what's going on. That way the Dalit feminists or movements away from the centre of the nation-state have a better understanding. For example, in Chennai, they know about the Kudankulam movement. They know the basis of the Dalit feminist movement. They cannot escape it.

But the Delhi feminist [academics] can. And do. Where is their engagement with the kinds of material conditions I have mentioned? In that sense, one could say that historical consciousness has either been muted or it is just simply so narrowed down; it has been defined in such a way

by one set of subjective experiences that it fails to grapple with other kinds of realities. Nobody will say that these are not important issues but systematic engagement and in-depth understanding are missing. An interesting thing that has happened is that today even sections of queer feminist movement, who have had their social roots in the urban middle class, have had to engage with Dalit movements.

But there is still the question of solidarities. Some time back, there was this movement called, 'Chalo Nagpur'; lots of different groups ended up in Nagpur and there were several heated debates and conflicts. For example, there was, to some extent, an argument between Dalit feminists and other strands of feminism, especially sex workers; it was very sharp, extremely sharp. Some of the Dalit feminists were really angry with some sex workers' perspectives that there was choice or agency involved in their engagement in sex work. Some of the Dalit feminists were so angry that they did not want to allow the sex workers to speak. But very interestingly, two other Dalit feminists intervened in this argument and ensured that the sex workers could make a statement.

After identity-based feminism questioned the idea of 'sisterhood' assumed by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s and put the concerns of different groups on the table there has been tension between various groups of feminists. But now there are also attempts to create solidarities and find means by which we can all do politics together. The question of what kind of politics, and in which direction it should move, still needs to be sorted out. But there is a desire to work together so that we do not lose our collective strength completely because there are important challenges facing all of us. For example, everyone is on the same page as far as Hindutva nationalism is concerned, or the policies of the state in post-liberalisation India. If today Dalits still need to struggle against high odds, it is precisely the failure of the state.

So, yes, there has been tension. But, then, some groups of feminists have acknowledged the flaws and blind spots of the earlier phase of the women's movement which pretended that there was one homogenous group of women, and that

has allowed us to have dialogue across differences of caste and class. Class was vaguely understood even earlier, but caste was not. Caste was the thing that made them feel guilty. Class did not make them feel guilty.

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