

Reframing Globalisation: Perspectives from the Women's Movement

MARY E JOHN

This is a feminist invitation to rethink the nation-to-globalisation narrative that structures prominent approaches to India's post-independence history. Exploring the question from different vantage points, it argues that the long history of the women's movement in India from the 19th century onwards has been fundamentally international in scope within which the "nation" occupied a troubled position. The more recent challenges of caste and sexuality are further reasons to question a unidimensional conceptualisation of the present. The very pressing uncertainties besetting the future of the women's movement in India – and elsewhere – would be better appreciated within a "post-national" as against a "global" conjunctural analysis.

Mary E. John (maryejohn1@gmail.com) is with the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi.

Across India, globalisation has become the decisive mark, if not horizon of our time. The fact that it is open-ended and fuzzy has done little to diminish the power of the term, as can be gauged from the way it is retrospectively restructuring not just our relationship to space but to time itself. Thus, India's post-independence history has now been narrativised as a shift, a transition from the "national" phase (when the newly created nation state embarked on its path of Nehruvian development) to the current globalising one, with a period of crisis in between.

The problem this piece seeks to address concerns the extent to which this narrative – and the hegemony accorded to globalisation in particular – is crowding out alternate accounts of our present. My point is not to deny the depth of contemporary transformations, or indeed, the power of "global" forces at different levels. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the political and methodological fallout of *already presuming* "globalisation" to be the prime mover of the present in contrast to that of the nation before. The danger here is that we are left with a unidimensional relationship to our present and our immediate past, one that obscures a host of questions and challenges. While it is obviously true that the nation no longer occupies the pre-eminent position that it once did, this

is because of multiple pressures and transformations, simultaneously within and beyond its boundaries. I would like to argue that it is imperative today to seek out such multiple accounts of recent processes, especially from the perspectives of long-standing social movements such as the women's movement. Without such accounts, current problems and crises for movements like the women's movement are reduced to the "effects" of globalisation, which can be more or less mechanically read off in a relation of direct causality, such as for instance, the negative impact on women of the new economic policies, or the co-option of the once autonomous women's movement through internationally funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

What changes, then, if one were to narrativise recent processes from the perspectives of those who have identified with the women's movement? This essay is a preliminary attempt to locate some of the strands for such a narrative, beginning with current responses to globalisation, before touching on the relationships between nationalism and the women's movement, other recent developments as well as more direct challenges confronting feminism and the women's movement today. Drawing these strands together calls for a conjunctural analysis of the present that would be better described as "postnational" rather than simply "global".

First of all, a closer look at current responses by feminists would reveal a surprising degree of diversity characterising feminist engagements with "globalisation" itself. This diversity not only indicates conflicting political positions, but points to deep differences in conceptualising the term itself – globalisation, then, is

a far from settled question. Not enough attention has been paid to the conceptual and political underpinnings of these varied approaches, each of which raises further questions of its own. Let me offer a few examples.¹

Feminist Opposition

The most prominent feminist voices in the Indian context are those that have opposed the coming of globalisation, and for reasons well-rehearsed in the literature. In this view, globalisation can only result in deepening processes of impoverishment and insecurity for the majority, with women suffering the most. In an effort to combat the dominant image of the “irreversibility” of the new economic order, a common strategy adopted by this perspective is to claim that globalisation is really nothing more than a bundle of policies undertaken at the behest of international pressure by a willing Indian state. Being the product of deliberate choices, this policy bundle can indeed be reversed by a differently oriented nation state prepared to resist and counter the new imperialism.

In sum, the leftist critiques of globalisation-as-economic-policy remain pinned to state-led welfare and socialist planning. The problems with this critique are then transferred to the alternative policy prescriptions offered. Since political-ideological frameworks centred on economic nationalism have lost much of their authority in the current climate, and since the State itself has changed with globalisation, they require much more careful justification. Ever since the landmark *Towards Equality* report, it has been common knowledge that the condition of women deteriorated sharply in the very era of socialistically oriented, import-substituting planned development – precisely the era that leftist critiques of globalisation hark back to today. How can we be confident that a resurrected version of this state – in the adverse market-dominated conditions of today – will be more accountable to its women?

A more fundamental oppositional critique has been offered by eco-feminists such as Vandana Shiva. Her critique extends well beyond the latest form of globalisation to cover the entire period of modernity,

colonialism and capitalism, and in such a manner that “decentralised agricultural communities” are the only alternative (Shiva 1998). Here, too, one is left with a host of unanswered questions, especially when it is claimed that women farmers already possess a non-hierarchical relation to production, nature, and to gender.

From a perspective that is very different from other left-oriented critiques, the Marxist-feminist Rohini Hensman argues against reducing globalisation to a set of policies. For her, globalisation is nothing short of the unfolding of a new phase in the evolution of world capitalism, one that demands a correspondingly international level of intervention and struggle. (This includes taking advantage of controversial World Trade Organisation (WTO) directives to link trade with labour standards.) The anti-globalisation agenda, in her view, does not make sense for third world women workers, with its defence of national boundaries which foster nationalisms that, in turn, promote imperialism, fascism and war (Hensman 2004). While there is much that is cogent in this account, where are the signs, however nascent, of such an international working class? Indeed, has it not become that much easier – in the era of global outsourcing – to pit workers against each other?

Yet, others like Gail Omvedt have made the case that the new economic order could actually help those very groups whom the prior era of developmentalism had marginalised. Thus the unviable monopolies and inefficient bureaucracies led by Hindu upper castes may well lose out to new multinational corporations employing the cheap labour of women or lower castes (Omvedt and Gala 1993). But why – asks Omvedt polemically – should this be seen a problem? While this argument has something in common with the feminisation of labour arguments made elsewhere, it too begs many questions: On what basis can one expect that hitherto marginalised groups will be in a position to take advantage of the new situation, or that dominant groups would lose out?

Finally, we have positions advocating what I would call a “people’s capitalism” in the Self-employed Women’s Association (SEWA) mould. The central argument of this perspective is that providing economic

and financial security to poor women workers in the informal sector is the proper pragmatic response to a world, where both the public and private sectors – in short, almost the entire formal sector which has been the backbone of India’s mixed economy – are facing erosion (Jhabvala and Subrahmanya 2000). The irony here is that it is international agencies such as the World Bank that were the first and keenest votaries of this way of responding to globalisation.

Divergent Pictures

These are doubtless highly schematic, if not reductive accounts. My simple aim is to show that very divergent pictures are being painted, even though we are dealing with only one dimension – and the best known one, at that – of globalisation, namely, its economic aspect. And this diversity exists in spite of the fact that all the views presented above are held by feminists committed to social justice, seasoned members of the women’s movement – these are not the responses of the neoliberal or fundamentalist right wing. There has been far too much reluctance, in my view, to recognise, and therefore, engage with such differences; nor has there been enough effort to tackle the many issues that each of these positions leaves unaddressed. A recent polemic by Gail Omvedt (2005) in favour of being “politically incorrect” by arguing against the “anti-globalisers” demonstrates how much more debate is needed. In the context of this essay, however, I wish to emphasise what these diverse perspectives have in common. In spite of being incommensurable on many counts, the above-mentioned responses share an important feature – they serve to destabilise the nation-to-globalisation narrative that is otherwise routinely seen as being beyond question.

In fact, and this is my second point, even a cursory examination of the women’s movement would demonstrate to what extent it has been pervasively structured by local and global forces from its very inception in the 19th century to the present. One would be hard-pressed to find any period when women’s issues emerged autonomously or authentically “in their own right”, so deeply mired have they been in the complex histories of colonialism and

nationalism. And yet, this heteronomy and even subjection to more powerful others has not stopped us from marking the contours of a movement, including the evolution of women's rights. The ebb and flow of the campaigns and debates that have come to be associated with the women's movement bear a particularly difficult relationship with the history of nationalism and the nation state. During the period of social reform, for instance, it has been argued that the emergence of cultural nationalism in the late 19th century in colonial Bengal resulted in the virtual disappearance of the women's question from public debate, whether the nationalist strategy be interpreted as having resolved the issue (Chatterjee 1993) or rather, of having failed to do so (Sarkar 2001). During the early 20th century, moreover, when women's organisations came into their own for the first time in several parts of the country, at a time when political nationalism was expanding, their own agendas were often universalist and international in scope. Once again, different accounts have been offered (Nair 1996; John 2000; Roy 2005; Sinha 2006) of this particular period. It is not for nothing that the 1950s and 1960s – years when the nation enjoyed a hegemonic status among most of its citizens and in the eyes of the world – were first called “the silent period” of the women's movement. Even though this is no longer an accurate description, the 1970s still mark a new beginning for many movements, including the women's movement, and in large part because these years witnessed the first major national crisis after independence.

Accounts of the rebirth of the women's movement focus almost exclusively on the range of local struggles that defined it – dowry deaths and custodial rape, mass organising for better wages, and so on. Far too little is said about how this moment was part of a larger conjuncture that witnessed movements for women's liberation in many parts of the world. There are reasons for such an aversion – the identification of feminism with the west, in particular. In retrospect we can discern a conflation of the desire for local accountability with that for authenticity. But rather than stick with a national narrative alone, we need accounts that are able to situate

the rise of the women's movement in relation to developments elsewhere, including all the problematic claims of universal sisterhood that were in currency at the time. Moreover, the international women's year of 1975 had significant effects on the movement here as well. Interestingly, the role of the nation state in this process was remarkably contradictory. We are more familiar with the State's repressive arm during the Emergency years that forced many radical groups, including women, to go underground or face imprisonment for their beliefs and activities. Less is publicly known about how the Indian State in 1972 did little in response to the United Nation's call for an in-depth examination of the “status of women” in its member nations, and how ultimately the department of women and family welfare sponsored the study and publication of the path-breaking *Towards Equality* report. This report shocked many with its evidence of widespread State failure, and subsequently became a “founding text” for the women's movement.

Trajectory of Movements

Indeed, if we take a step back from the nation-to-globalisation narrative, and look instead at the trajectory of movements, the story would, if anything, be the reverse. Feminism was a much stronger force internationally in the 1970s and 1980s than it is today. It is hard even to speak of the presence of movements such as the women's movement in many parts of the contemporary western world. What we do have are international organisations who have taken on “our” concerns in various ways, which is significantly different. Or again, there are pedagogic responses, whereby “third world feminism” enters the first world classroom, again a somewhat different development. Even though globalisation is certainly aiding the traffic in people and ideas unthinkable a generation ago, the pre-globalisation years witnessed a much more intense international feminist ferment, including combating false universalisms and highlighting local differences. Today we are less likely to hear about struggles and campaigns in other parts of the world while much more international expertise focuses on the problems of governance in the “developing world”, gender included.

My third counter to the undue emphasis being placed on globalisation today is that the challenges before the women's movement are irreducibly plural. The very years from the late 1980s and 1990s that witnessed the official abandonment of the regimes of state-led development, have also seen the (re)emergence of communalism, the rise of caste, and more recently, the challenges of non-normative sexuality. Each of these has disturbed the grounds of the women's movement in fundamental ways, and need to be looked at in their own right, regardless of whether they are related to global processes. There is no way, for instance, that the wave of backward caste politics of the 1980s, culminating in the pathological backlash of the anti-Mandal agitation of 1990, can be laid at the door of globalisation. If anything, links would have to be drawn in the opposite direction, as upper caste elites kicked away the welfare state – as the ladder they no longer needed – with greater ferocity after the move to implement reservations in government services and higher education. It was only in the 1990s that significant sections of an identifiably upper caste women's movement developed caste-based critiques of gender, rediscovered the forgotten legacies of Periyar, Phule and Ambedkar, and responded to the demands of dalit women for a separate political space. We have just begun to historicise this hugely significant moment in the making of the movement (e.g. Tharu and Niranjana 1996; Chakravarti 2003; Rege 2006).

Issues of sexuality are equally far-reaching and contentious. Unfortunately, it has been possible for a number of feminists to evade the newer languages and challenges of sexuality movements – such as the gay and lesbian movement or struggles over sex work – precisely by seeing them as off-shoots of globalisation. Thus, heavily financed AIDS awareness campaigns among sex workers have been viewed with considerable unease, as have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) NGOs dependent on foreign funding. Sexuality campaigns against the sodomy laws, or in favour of sex workers' rights – not to speak of questions of normative sexuality – are just beginning to find some space for debate and recognition, whether

among major women's organisations or in women's studies (e.g., Menon 2007).

Need for Fuller Narratives

Finally, of course, we must have fuller narratives of the recent trajectories of the women's movement as a movement in its own right. No one would deny that much has changed in the intervening years, and the heightened institutionalisation and professionalisation of feminism is one of the hallmarks of our present. (Is this uniquely true of the women's movement, and, if so, why?) Feminism now has a marginal presence in the syllabi of different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, while women's studies centres are proliferating across the country under the fiat of the University Grants Commission. Institutionalisation has congealed around the term "gender", as state, NGOs and women's organisations take on various tasks in its name. These include: the collection of gender disaggregated data, gender sensitisation and training of a range of personnel, from high ranking officials to activists, the provision of gender-related services, legal awareness and research, and they all require expertise and funding. This means that a certain presence, if not power, however contradictory, attaches to the subject "women".

But the question remains – how exactly should we contrast this situation with yesterday, without claiming a unique autonomy for an earlier time? Equally critically, if the future of the women's movement occupies an uncertain place today, compared to the buoyant energies of the 1970s and 1980s, then these current challenges must be described, at least to some minimum degree, with the vocabulary of feminist politics. In what ways, then, have patriarchies and gender relations changed in recent decades? In spite of the greater institutional visibility of feminism today, what are the experiences of a younger generation, such as metropolitan students (who spearheaded the women's movement a generation ago) that appear to be generating expressions of disavowal towards feminism? A teacher in a Mumbai college recently described her disappointment, when, barring a few exceptions, most women students did not relate positively to issues concerning the women's movement

and feminist theorising. For some – English-speaking, upwardly mobile and with strong professional ambitions of their own – feminism was rejected because it seemed to block or mock their desires; for others, particularly lower middle class students, unsure of any future outside of marriage, feminism appeared alienating, unable to touch their destinies (Phadke, nd).

'Thick Descriptions'

We need many more "thick descriptions" of such situated experiences – and not only from major cities – in order to better understand the current trajectories of women and the women's movement. It is only by synthesising analyses drawn from a range of contemporary locations, especially those that have been marginal in most accounts so far, that we can see at what points a movement like feminism is overdetermined by other developments such as "globalisation". But such accounts are hard to come by.

Drawing these strands together clearly calls for a conjunctural analyses of the distinct moments structuring the period from the 1970s into these first years of the 21st century. Moreover, in order to produce urgently needed – and less insular – "big pictures", we must look towards comparative accounts of multiple feminisms and their diverse destinies – within south Asia, across Asia, and in relation to other regions.² As I have been claiming throughout, the women's movement has never simply been a local phenomenon but one whose history has been characterised by profound mutual influences, contestations, commonalities and differences. Where do feminisms stand in relation to "globalisation" (howsoever construed) in other spaces – Pakistan or Sri Lanka, China or Korea, the US or France?

By way of a provisional conclusion, I would like to suggest that – at least in India – we are better served using the notion of the "postnational" as a marker of our present. The postnational acknowledges that the nation no longer occupies the sovereign position or horizon of intelligibility that it once did. Its most constructive function would be to provide some critical distance from the "nation to globalisation" narrative dominating India's post-independence history. The ruptures

and disorientations of the last decade or so should also be seen as an invaluable opportunity, enabling us to look back from different subaltern locations at the makings of "India". By virtue of its own remarkable history and entanglements in a range of processes – from the most local to the most international – and its closeness to centres of power along with its presence at the margins, the women's movement offers a unique vantage point for retelling the story of contemporary India.

NOTES

- 1 The following section draws from an earlier discussion in John (2005).
- 2 For an example of recent work within Asia, see John (2007).

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