

Feminist Political Theory and Contemporary Politics: Traditions, Tensions and Indian Applications

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Abstract

Feminist political theory is not a single body of thought but a family of overlapping and often contending traditions that have shared one project: the critique of gendered power in public life. From the eighteenth-century arguments for civic equality advanced by Mary Wollstonecraft through the radical, socialist, intersectional and postcolonial revisions of the twentieth century, feminist theorists have steadily expanded both the meaning of "the political" and the cast of subjects considered to have political standing. This paper surveys five major traditions in feminist political theory—liberal, radical, socialist/Marxist, intersectional and postcolonial—and then puts them to work on four contemporary developments in Indian politics: the passage of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in 2023, the journey from Shah Bano (1985) to the criminalisation of triple talaq (2017–2019), the Sabarimala verdict of 2018, and the Indian iteration of the #MeToo movement after 2018. The argument is that no single tradition captures the full texture of these episodes; each tradition illuminates one dimension of a problem that the others tend to flatten or obscure. The contemporary Indian setting, where gender intersects with caste, religion, region and class in unusually dense ways, makes the case for theoretical pluralism in feminist analysis particularly compelling.

Keywords: feminist political theory, liberal feminism, intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, Indian feminism, gender justice, contemporary politics

1. Introduction

To do feminist political theory is to refuse a certain partition of human life. The classical political tradition, from Aristotle through John Locke, treated the household as belonging to a domain of nature, necessity or private affection that lay outside the proper subject matter of political philosophy. Feminist theorists, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792 and intensifying through the second half of the twentieth century, have argued that this partition is itself a political act—one that conceals the unequal distribution of power between men and women behind the language of nature and privacy (Okin 1989; Pateman 1988). The slogan "the personal is political," associated with the radical feminism of the late 1960s, captures the move.

Over the past half-century, feminist political theory has fragmented into a productive plurality of traditions. Each begins from a different diagnosis of what is most wrong with the gendered order—formal inequality, structural violence, capitalist exploitation, the indivisibility of caste and gender, or the colonial inheritance of categories like "woman" and "rights"—and each accordingly proposes a different remedy. This paper has two aims. The first is expository: to set out, in compact form, what each of the five major traditions has argued and how they relate to one another. The second is applicative: to ask what these traditions can offer when brought to bear on four contemporary episodes in Indian political life, none of which yields its meaning to a single theoretical lens. The argument is not that feminist political theory provides ready-made answers to contemporary controversies but that it sharpens the questions and complicates the easy ones.

2. Literature Review

The literature in feminist political theory is vast, and any review must be selective. This section identifies the principal contributions of each of the five traditions surveyed, with attention to both their Western origins and their Indian interlocutors.

Liberal feminism traces its lineage to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and continues through John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) to twentieth-century work by Betty Friedan (1963), Susan Moller Okin (1989) and Martha Nussbaum (2000). The unifying claim is that the formal extension of civil, political and economic rights to women, combined with the dismantling of legal barriers and gendered role expectations, is the foundation of gender justice. Okin extended the liberal frame into the family, arguing that a just society could not rest on an unjust household; Nussbaum's capabilities approach offered a substantive standard for

evaluating institutions in terms of what they enable women to be and do.

Radical feminism, associated with Kate Millett (1970), Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Catharine MacKinnon (1989), broke from liberal feminism on the question of whether the existing legal order could be reformed at all. For radical feminists, patriarchy is a free-standing system of male power, more fundamental than capitalism, that reproduces itself through sexuality, violence and the social construction of gender. MacKinnon's work on sexual harassment translated radical insight into legal practice and reshaped the doctrine of equality.

Socialist and Marxist feminism, represented by Heidi Hartmann (1979), Silvia Federici (2004) and, in a different idiom, Iris Marion Young (1990), insisted that gender oppression cannot be detached from the political economy in which it is embedded. Hartmann's "unhappy marriage" of Marxism and feminism argued that capitalism and patriarchy interlock, with the gendered division of unpaid reproductive labour underwriting the wage economy. Federici supplied a deep history for this argument through her work on the witch hunts and the enclosures.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) but anticipated in the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977) and bell hooks (1981), is now arguably the dominant framework in Anglophone feminist theory. The core claim is that systems of oppression—race, gender, class, sexuality, disability—do not operate as discrete additive variables but as mutually constitutive structures, such that the experience of a Black working-class woman cannot be derived from the experience of white women plus the experience of Black men. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) developed this into the framework of the "matrix of domination."

Postcolonial feminism is the tradition with the most direct purchase on the Indian setting. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" (1984) offered the foundational critique: that mainstream Western feminism had constructed a homogeneous "Third World woman" as a passive victim of indigenous patriarchies, a representation that obscured women's agency and licensed forms of intervention that were continuous with colonial reason. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) raised the further question of whether the categories of liberal feminism could even register the speech of women at the intersection of multiple subordinations. In the Indian context, Uma Chakravarti's (1993; 2003) concept of *Brahmanical patriarchy* has provided the most influential indigenous theoretical contribution, locating gender subordination within a caste-structured social order in which sexual control of upper-caste women maintains caste purity itself. Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012) has carried this analytical sensibility into contemporary debates over law, sexuality and the state. Sharmila Rege's (2006) work on Dalit

feminist standpoint extended the intersectional argument by insisting that Dalit women's experience cannot be subsumed under either a generic "Indian women" or a generic "Dalit" category.

What emerges from this literature is not a single theory but a toolkit. Each tradition foregrounds a different aspect of gendered power, and the most productive contemporary work draws on more than one.

3. Methodology

The paper adopts a mixed approach. It begins with theoretical framing—a structured reading of the five traditions outlined above—and then applies that framing to four contemporary episodes in Indian politics. Case selection was guided by three criteria. First, each case had to be a major site of contemporary contestation, not a doctrinal curiosity. Second, the cases collectively had to span the principal axes of feminist concern: political representation, religious personal law, sacred space, and sexual violence in professional life. Third, the cases had to be illuminated differently by different theoretical traditions, so that the analytical pay-off of pluralism could be demonstrated rather than asserted.

The four cases are accordingly: (a) the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam of 2023; (b) the trajectory from the Shah Bano judgement of 1985 through Shayara Bano (2017) and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019; (c) the Sabarimala verdict of September 2018; and (d) the Indian #MeToo movement from late 2018. The treatment of each is necessarily compressed; the purpose is to demonstrate analytical reach, not to offer comprehensive empirical accounts.

4. Discussion: Theoretical Traditions and Indian Cases

4.1 The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023): Liberal Aspiration and Its Critics

The Constitution (128th Amendment) Act, 2023, popularly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserves one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and in state legislative assemblies for women. The Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha on 20 September 2023 with 454 votes in favour and two against, and in the Rajya Sabha the next day with 214 votes in favour and none against. The seats are to be allotted on a rotational basis, and the reservation will take effect only after the next

census and the subsequent delimitation exercise. At the time of passage, women constituted roughly 15 per cent of Lok Sabha and 13 per cent of Rajya Sabha members, a figure low by both global and regional comparison.

Read through the lens of liberal feminism, the Amendment is a paradigmatic achievement: a formal, constitutional extension of political opportunity to women as women, in a domain where their underrepresentation has been chronic. Okin's argument that justice requires equality of voice in collective decision-making, and Nussbaum's capabilities-based defence of affiliation as a central political functioning, both find direct expression here. The 73rd and 74th Amendments of 1992–93, which mandated similar reservations at the panchayat and municipal levels, are widely understood to have produced substantive changes in policy attention to women's concerns at the local level, lending empirical support to the liberal case.

But the Amendment has also drawn principled feminist critique, much of it drawing on socialist and intersectional resources. Several commentators have noted that the absence of a sub-quota for Other Backward Class and Muslim women repeats the pattern that Crenshaw's (1989) original intersectional intervention identified: a reform framed in terms of "women" risks delivering its benefits disproportionately to the relatively privileged among them. The deferred commencement, contingent on a census and delimitation process not yet begun, has further attracted criticism that the legislation operates more as symbolic politics than as immediate redistributive measure. The 2023 Amendment thus illustrates both the achievement of liberal feminist politics and the limits that intersectional analysis presses against it.

4.2 From Shah Bano to Triple Talaq: Postcolonial Tensions in Personal Law

The trajectory connecting the Supreme Court's 1985 decision in *Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum* to the *Shayara Bano* verdict of 22 August 2017 and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019 is the single most theoretically demanding episode in contemporary Indian feminism. The Shah Bano judgement granted a divorced Muslim woman maintenance under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, a secular provision; the Rajiv Gandhi government, responding to political pressure from conservative sections of the Muslim community, then enacted the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, which restricted maintenance to the iddat period. Three decades later, in *Shayara Bano*, the Supreme Court declared instant triple talaq unconstitutional by a 3:2 majority; the 2019 Act criminalised the practice with imprisonment up to three years.

For liberal feminism, the sequence reads as a story of intermittent progress: a secular court repeatedly affirming the equal civic standing of Muslim women against personal-law restrictions. The criminalisation of triple talaq, in this reading, is the consummation of an argument first made in Shah Bano.

Postcolonial feminism complicates the picture. Mohanty's (1984) caution against the construction of the "Third World woman" as helpless victim is salient: the dominant political framing of the 2019 Act, particularly by the ruling party, drew rhetorical force from precisely the image that Mohanty warned against. Indian Muslim feminist scholarship, including the work of organisations like the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, has insisted on a more delicate position—supporting reform of triple talaq while resisting both its capture by majoritarian political projects and the criminalisation of what is, civilly speaking, a divorce. The criminal-law framing, postcolonial feminists have argued, treats Muslim men as a community of presumed offenders in a way the civil law had not, and risks rendering Muslim women dependent on a state whose protective gestures may be conditional on their community's political acquiescence. The episode demonstrates that gender justice for minority women cannot be detached from the politics of religious community, and that the liberal individualism which makes the right of equal treatment legible is itself, in this context, theoretically inadequate.

4.3 Sabarimala (2018): Radical Feminism, Constitutional Morality and Sacred Space

In *Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala*, decided on 28 September 2018 by a 4:1 majority, the Supreme Court struck down the centuries-old practice of excluding women between the ages of ten and fifty from the Sabarimala temple in Kerala. The Court held that the exclusion violated Articles 14, 15, 17 and 25 of the Constitution and failed to qualify as an essential religious practice protected under Article 26. Justice D. Y. Chandrachud's concurring opinion was particularly notable for its reliance on constitutional morality and its argument that exclusion grounded in notions of menstrual impurity was incompatible with the abolition of untouchability under Article 17.

Radical feminism reads the case as exemplary. The bodily exclusion of women of reproductive age from a sacred space, justified by the symbolic association of menstruation with impurity, is precisely the kind of structural inscription of patriarchy on the female body that Millett (1970) and MacKinnon (1989) theorised. The judgement's willingness to displace religious custom in favour of

substantive equality is the kind of intervention radical legal feminists have long urged.

Postcolonial and intersectional readings press a harder question. Many of the female devotees of Lord Ayyappa themselves opposed the change. This is not, on its face, a refutation of the radical feminist analysis; false consciousness has always been a permissible concept within that tradition. But it raises the question Mohanty's critique made central: can a feminism that overrides the expressed religious commitments of the women on whose behalf it speaks remain a feminism of agency, or does it tip into the paternalism that postcolonial theory most criticises? The subsequent review proceedings and the protests that followed the judgement suggest that the question is not settled.

4.4 #MeToo India (2018–): Intersectionality and the Politics of Voice

The Indian iteration of the #MeToo movement began in October 2018 when a series of allegations against prominent men in journalism, cinema and the arts surfaced on social media, with particular force directed at figures including the then Union Minister of State for External Affairs M. J. Akbar, who subsequently resigned. The movement followed an earlier disclosure—the 2017 List of Sexual Harassers in Academia compiled by Raya Sarkar—that had already produced sharp feminist disagreement.

Intersectional theory provides the most penetrating framework for understanding the Indian #MeToo. The movement's most visible cases involved English-speaking women in elite professional settings; its capacity to bring sanction was real but uneven, concentrated in workplaces that already possessed some institutional infrastructure for grievance. Scholarly assessments have argued that the movement reproduced the very hierarchies it sought to challenge, with Dalit, Muslim and working-class women's experiences of sexual violence largely absent from the dominant narrative (Pan 2023; Phadke 2022). The earlier rupture over Sarkar's list, in which several senior feminists urged due process while younger Dalit and queer scholars defended the list as a disruption of entrenched savarna feminist authority, made visible long-standing fault lines within Indian feminism itself.

Read in the light of Chakravarti's (1993) and Rege's (2006) work, the Indian #MeToo demonstrates that gender-based mobilisation in India cannot proceed innocent of caste. The intersectional and Dalit-feminist analyses do not refute the movement's achievements; they sharpen the question of whose voices the movement amplified and whose it could not reach. This is the structural insight that intersectionality brought into political theory in the first place.

5. Conclusion

Each of the four episodes considered here yields differently to different theoretical lenses, and none is fully captured by any single tradition. The Women's Reservation Amendment is, in significant measure, a liberal achievement; it is also, in equally significant measure, an intersectional incompleteness. The triple talaq sequence is illegible without the postcolonial tradition's attention to the relation between gender justice and the politics of religious community. Sabarimala foregrounds the radical feminist analysis of the patriarchal inscription of impurity on the female body while raising the postcolonial question of whose agency the judgement honours. The Indian #MeToo is a case study both in the necessity of intersectional analysis and in the costs of its absence.

The conclusion is not relativist. Some traditions are more illuminating than others in particular cases, and feminist analysis ought to make that judgement explicitly rather than evade it. The broader point is that feminist political theory has earned its plurality. The traditions surveyed here are not stages in a developmental sequence that a mature analysis must transcend; they are partially overlapping tools, each calibrated to grip a different aspect of gendered power. Contemporary politics, in India as elsewhere, is messy enough that no single tool will do the work. The discipline of feminist political theory consists, increasingly, in knowing which tradition to reach for at which moment, and why—and in acknowledging, with honesty, what each one cannot see.

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