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WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN INDIA: NEGOTIATING SECULARISM AND RELIGION

ABSTRACT
In post-independence India secularism was almost taken for granted as a defining feature of the women's movement with its rejection of the public expression of religious and caste identities. However, already by the 1980s, the assumption that gender could be used as a unifying factor was challenged, revealing that women from different social (class/caste) and religious backgrounds understand and sometime use their identities in ways that are not driven necessarily by some ideology (such as feminism or human rights), but by more immediate concerns and even opportunism. This realization opened up a debate about new strategies to tackle women's activism, especially in light of aggressive political activism of some women associated with right-wing parties in India, which has clearly shattered the perception, held by some, of women as inherently peace-loving, whose gender identity would override their caste and religious belonging.

Within the women's movement in India, that goes back to the colonial era and the struggle for independence (see Ray 2002; Mehrotra 2002), one can observe different forms of participation of women in a variety of socio-economic movements with issues ranging from land reforms to, more recently, environment protection. The movement thus is not monolithic, but consists of a multiplicity of actors that include activists in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), autonomous women's associations, the Women's Initiative, a well-known feminist organization, and a host of other women's organizations including party-affiliated women's organizations.[1] There are also various initiatives at local level, as well as activists in research and documentation centers

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1   All major political parties in India have women's wings, most notably, BJP Mahila Morcha of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and All India Mahila Congress of the Indian National Congress (INC). The Communist Party of India (CPI) women's wing is National Federation of Indian Women.

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underscoring the distinction between women's movement and women's studies, but without ruling out that some women have successfully assumed both activist and academic roles.

Religion as an identity marker was not taken as important in early women's organizations. In post-independent India secularism was almost taken for granted to be a defining feature of women's movement with its rejection of the public expression of religious and caste identities. The assumption was that, given the underprivileged and marginalized status of women in a predominantly patriarchal culture, the gender identity would be a unifying factor, irrespective of differences in social, economic, educational and religious backgrounds of women participants. However, already by the 1980s it became clear that for many women religious identity was in fact quite important and a source of empowerment and, furthermore, that there are significant differences in how women understand what 'women's issues' are and what strategies to use to resolve them. In view of that, our task in this essay is to identify what aspects of which religion have served as sources of empowerment for some, while rejected by other women, and why. Secondly, we examine how the recent growth of religious nationalism intersects with gender and class/caste; that is, how manipulation and political (mis)appropriation of gendered religious imagery and symbols continue to impact women's activism in India, arguably, with mixed results.

Women and their Identities

In their wish to consider themselves free from religious and caste identity markings, the early activists in women's movement tended to treat gender almost as a pre-existing category. But it turned out that gender as a source of identity is more complex and harder to mobilize than originally assumed since generally people in India, and women in particular, "are socialized to see themselves as belonging to a religion, a linguistic group, a cultural community, a region, a village/town/city"; but when it comes to gender identity, women "are merely taught a series of roles. To be a woman does not necessarily mean to have an identity of a woman" (Phadke 2003: 4575).

Since initially considerable number of activists tended to be Hindu women from upper castes, they ended up adopting, if only inadvertently, idioms and symbols for mobilizing and empowering women that came primarily from Hindu religio-cultural background (Govinda 2013). The fact that the Hindu pantheon includes some powerful goddesses, when recast in feminist mold, was seen as a potential source of empowerment for Indian women. However, a closer look at the relation between goddesses and women revealed a paradox of the female status in Hinduism: on the one hand, a high status of goddesses on cosmological level, and on the other, subordination and devaluation of women in society (Wadley 1977; Gold 2008). It is true that the female agency plays a crucial role in Hindu religion and philosophy: Shakti (*śakti*), as personification of divine feminine creative power; Prakrti (*prakṛti*), or 'nature', as the

feminine aspect of all life forms, inspired some women in eco-feminist movement; and Maya (*māyā),* an important philosophical concept identified with woman in her capacity of a principle or an alluring power that conceals the true character of spiritual reality. Thus, the question arises: "if female power animates the universe, how is it that the women so often appear to be disempowered in their everyday actions?" (Gold 2008: 179). In other words, where does the agency of mortal women stand in the context of the goddess worship? Here we actually see a certain parallel or correspondence between the two: while the positive qualities are commonly associated with women and goddesses in their wifely or maternal roles, the negative ones tend to be associated with women or the goddesses who act independently of men or male gods respectively.[2] It is no wonder that some women activists saw in the powerful and independent Hindu goddesses, such as Durga and Kali, a potential source for the empowerment of women.

However, this is precisely where the problems for a unified women's movement start. The women from low castes (especially Dalits)[3] and/or some minority religions (especially Islam) have objected to the Hindu heroines and goddesses as their empowerment models because Dalits, for example, massively reject Hinduism because of its caste legacy and discrimination against them that persist to this day. Muslim, Christian or Parsi women[4], for their part, cannot identify with Hindu goddesses either, for obvious religious reasons. As Radhika Govinda aptly notes: "What these activists and organizations had failed to recognize was that the category 'women' was in itself an abstraction, that women have many identities and that, under different circumstances, they may favour one or the other of their identities, at times, even over their gender identity" (Govinda 2013: 624). These complex relationships between religion, class/caste and gender opened up the debate about a necessity to "retheorize gender away from biology and into the realm of social signification" (Reddy 2006: 99). Furthermore, these issues revealed "political differences about conceptualisation of the roots and agents of oppression" and that for the diversity of women in India,

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2   There are also exceptions to this type of correspondence: for example, Indira Gandhi, who was married, was in popular imagination compared to Durga incarnate. Or, more recently, the first female officer in Indian Police Service, Kiran Bedi, has also been compared to the goddess Durga and is seen as a role model for young girls and their empowerment.

3   Dalit (in Hindi/ Marathi means 'the oppressed', 'broken') is a term adopted by ex-Untouchables or low castes, to refer to themselves. Mohandas Gandhi called them Harijans, "the children of God", while in official parlance they are also referred to as Scheduled Castes. Their cause was popularized by a reformer and activist, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), a Dalit himself, who converted to Buddhism having found the Hindu caste system with its discrimination of low castes, tribal and other minority groups unacceptable. Ambedkar includes in his definition of Dalits all oppressed people irrespective of their caste and religion.

4   Parsi (or 'Persian') in India refers to ethno-religious group who came from Iran over thousand years ago, to escape islamization of their country. Their religion is Zoroastrianism.

and the complex and changing circumstances within which they are variously located, there cannot be a single strategy or ideological solution (Mehrotra 2002: 58). That is to say, women neither perceive nor, consequently, respond to their predicament in a uniform way just because they are women, and in India, the solutions have to be sought against a backdrop of its specific social and historical contexts. In that sense, the shift has occurred from primarily or solely women's issues to a wider issue of identity politics of class/caste and religion.

Thus, many Dalit and tribal women activists have rejected the claim of "common oppression" of women as women arguing that it "obscures important aspects of women's complicated and diverse social realities", so that, for example, the plight of a Dalit or a Muslim woman in rural areas cannot be compared to that of an upper caste, urban Hindu woman (Garlough 2008, 182). Of course, what is left out in this kind of argument is the fact that the position of a Dalit or a Muslim woman in rural areas is not essentially different from that of a low caste Hindu woman. They are equally underprivileged, regardless of their religion. In any case, to avoid or counteract this type of conflicting issues, some women's organizations have resorted to the use of language typical of human rights. The reasoning behind it being to divert attention away from the arguments about class and/or religion-based gender oppression of specific groups and turn it into the basic human rights issue of women. But as it turns out, invoking these more universal egalitarian principles and recognized rights in a society which continues to be dominated by communal identities with their set boundaries, has not proved to be very productive. Instead, it has added to the ambivalence in pursuing women's agenda.

It became clear that the differential emphasis placed on relations *between* the groups, must also be placed on the gender inequalities *within* the group (Dalit or Muslim), which are hardly monolithic (Vijayalaksmi 2005). Namely, there are Muslims (*Ashrafs*) who are seen as equivalent to upper caste Hindus, and others (*Ajlafs*), who would correspond to some of Hindu lower castes, as well as those (*Arzals*) who are similar to Dalits in their deprivation, occupying the lowest strata of society (Govinda 2013: 640).[5] However, the Dalit women activists, who saw their 'otherness' and subordination as distinct and separate from that of the other (non-Dalit) women, emphasized the importance for their movement to articulate their own experience of marginalization and stigmatization. Furthermore, some Dalit women activists in rural areas have figured that they could use their caste identity to advance their position beyond village-level women's activism and into local electoral politics (Govinda 2006). As some scholars have noted, the problem here is the common misperception of social movements as something uniform and unitary in terms of motivations or even ideology, when their concerns and interests only partly or barely overlap. It follows from this that women's movements like most social movements

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5   Even though, in theory, Islam is opposed to this type of differentiation, Muslims in India are divided along various lines: class, caste-like stratification, occupation, language, region.

"are systems of action, coordinating a multiplicity of beliefs and intentions", that need to be articulated strategically for specific purposes that would resonate with particular groups (Rajagopal 2001: 212). Thus, the attempt to create a uniform platform for 'sisterhood' have not met the expectations of many a leading activist but has shown instead that women from different backgrounds understand and sometime use their identities in ways that are not driven necessarily by some ideology (like feminism or human rights), but by more immediate concerns and even opportunism.

Furthermore, it was argued that Indian context, due to its multilayered cultural background, framed within both colonial and postcolonial history, requires homegrown strategies, rather than accepting those from the Western feminists. Those are perceived by some leftist leaning activists as hegemonic, inadvertently trying to mold women around the world in their own (Western) 'image' (Vijayalakshmi 2005). Efforts were made to address specifically Indian women's issues in ways that correspond to the circumstances in which they live. One such local and successful example of women's activism is the use of street theatre by various feminist grassroot organizations. This form of activism, based on performance, goes back to times of struggle for independence, when the message was primarily political and geared towards exposing colonial oppression (Liddle 1986; Segal 1997). In more recent times, this type of performance activism – using the traditional dance form, popular among women especially in rural areas, as well as dramatization of folk stories familiar to them – is meant to draw the attention to the current issues that affect women's lives on daily basis. Some of those issues include violence against women (domestic violence, rape, communal violence), their exclusion from inheritance law, sex-selective abortion; and more generally, their unacknowledged place in history and religion (Garlough 2008). Despite immense complexity and diversity of the audiences in terms of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, or education and political affiliations, some activists remain positive and hopeful that "a feminist message through the proficient presentation of an appropriated women's folk form demonstrates to the audience the ways that a critical perspective may be advanced without outright rejection of one's heritage", that is, of one's cultural and religious belonging (Garlough 2008: 186).[6]

However, the truth is that in practice feminism has often, if not rejected, certainly downplayed the importance of religious belonging as a lived experience of many women – the fact that religious nationalists in particular have caught on. Appealing to women's religious sentiments presented and expressed primarily as a sanctity of domestic and family life, rightwing Hindu organizations have been selectively encouraging women's activism for "Mother India" (Bharat Mata), the personification of India as a mother goddess. Thus, religious

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6   The notion that there is "a feminist message" is also recognized as problematic, not only because there is no one "feminist message", but because some women's organizations refuse even to be identified as "feminist" arguing that there is no consensus even among women activists as to what this term as an ideology or practice actually means, to say nothing of what it means to the less educated or illiterate women (cf. Mehrotra 2002).

nationalists have managed to tap into certain segments of women's activism and incorporate it into their political agendas. The use of gendered symbolism (such as Mother India), in what we may call 'matriotic' political context, has a history of its own. In the 19th century, Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya in his influential novel *Anandamath* (1882) wrote a poem in a mixture of Sanskrit and Bengali and called it *Vande Mataram* (I Revere the Mother). By 'vernacularizing' the Sanskrit, Bankim successfully appeals to the authority of tradition, on the one hand, and "the enveloping freshness of current [Bengali] speech", on the other (Lipner 2009: 103). Both were to play an important role in raising national self-awareness in the context of Indian struggle for independence. The poem has nine stanzas the first two, written in Sanskrit, became a 'national song', a hymn of praise to "Mother India" conceived as a 'deity':

I revere the Mother! The Mother/ Rich in waters, rich in fruit/
Cooled by the southern airs/ Verdant with the harvest fair.
The Mother—with nights that thrill/ in the light of the moon/
Radiant with foliage and flowers in bloom/ Speaking sweetly,
speaking gently/ Giving joy and gifts in plenty.[7]

While for many Hindus both the slogan and the poem *Vande Mataram* resonated with their 'matriotic' feelings, Muslims were not in favor of it, and even found it provocative and a sign of a growing Hindu nationalism, at the time when the Hindu-Muslim cooperation in anticolonial struggle was strained. Nehru's Working Committee later deliberated on the status of this poem (song) and concluded that the two stanzas, which had in the meantime acquired "a separate individuality" (from the stanzas with more explicit sectarian connotations) would not be an anthem of free India, but as an "inseparable part of our national movement" it is her beloved "national song" (Lipner 2009: 112–113). Decades after her Independence, though, the 'national poem' of India continues to resonate in the same controversial ways among Hindu and Muslim communities. In the context of our discussion of women's empowerment *via* independent and powerful Hindu goddesses – and their lack of capacity to be the role models for all Indian women – the poem *Vande Mataram* represents yet another example of how the invocation of "Mother India" is empowering for the same (Hindu) women for whom Durga or Kali are the source of empowerment. They may indeed see in these goddesses the 'mother'. Other women may at best see in her "their step mother".

Women's Wing of Political Parties

In post-independence India, while Nehruvian vision of modernity was still echoing throughout this complex society, secular nationalism, "the ideological mainstay" of the then ruling Indian National Congress (INC), primarily sought

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7   For the whole poem, see Lipner 2009: 101–102.

to preserve the territorial integrity of the country. However, this vision of India was increasingly challenged (especially from the mid 1980s) by the politics of an aggressive Hindu self-assertion known as Hindutva.[8] The key point of Hindutva ideology is premised on 'Hinduization' of Indian society based on an argument that religious pluralism and secularism embedded in the protection of minority rights, as laid down by India's Constitution, is harmful for national cohesiveness and integrity. Secularism proclaimed by the state, however, is meant not to grant privileged status to any particular religion, because it is in the interest of the state that all religions be kept at "equal distance". This have proved to be problematic because, as Ashutosh Varshney points out, the "equal distance" can also be understood as the "equal proximity" and thus lead to government's deeper entanglement in religion and politics of India's numerous religious communities (Varshney 1993: 249).

The case that highlights this ambivalence is well known as 'the Shah Bano's case' of the mid 1980s. It involved a Muslim woman, who requested alimentation after her husband had divorced her by pronouncing "I divorce you" (in Arabic, *talaq*) three times (Vatuk 2009). Arguing that it was not in accordance with Islamic law (Shari'a), the husband refused to do it. Shah Bano filed her case to the Supreme Court of India arguing that the country's civil law (Art.125 of the Code of Criminal procedure) should override any Personal laws granted to religious minorities.[9] Originally, the court's decision supported Shah Bano's claim but then, faced with the backlash of Muslims across the country against this ruling, the decision was repealed on the grounds that it is an infringement of religious freedoms and that in personal family matters--such as marriage and divorce--it is the Personal law (in this case Shari'a) that prevails.[10] While this decision appeased the feelings of (male) Muslims, at the expense of the female plaintiff, it upset Hindu nationalists. They complained that the government was once again giving in to the demands of a religious minority and

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8   Hindu religious nationalism dates back to the 19th century Hindu revivalism that was a response to British colonial rule. It was articulated as *Hindutva* in 1925 by V.D. Savarkar in his book of the same name. Hindutva supporters and their political parties accuse the state of pseudo-secularism, by which they mean that the state shows weakness when it comes to minority religions and at the expense of majority Hindu interests. This kind of attitude was early on in Indian independence epitomized in the tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu extremist, whose reasoning and then aggressive action was directly informed by Hindutva ideology. While for certain segments of population Hindutva is currently the matter of belief, for others it is just an idea.

9   After Indian independence, Indian Constitution granted the minorities in India, most notably Muslims, the so called Personal Law, that is, the right to invoke this law in matters such as inheritance, marriage and divorce. Even though a minority, there are 181 million Muslims in India (according to 2001 census), so that after Hinduism, Islam is the second most practiced religion in India. India is the third largest Muslim country in the world (after Indonesia and Pakistan).

10   A year later, Muslim Women Bill (Protection of Rights on Divorce) was passed, exempting Muslim women from the Art.125 of the Code of Criminal procedure, which Shah Bano invoked to protect her rights as a divorced Muslim woman (Vijayalaksmi 2005).

thus allegedly threatening the secular state. The irony is that the concern of Hindu nationalists was not to secure a uniform secular law that would apply to all women irrespective of their religious background, that women's movement pushed for since the 1960s. Rather, it was to enforce their own Hindu hegemony, i.e., apply the Hindu law to *all* Indians, including Muslims. How that played out a few years later became clear in one of the most tragic events in Hindu-Muslim relations in independent India (Govinda 2013).

In December of 1992, a long contested religious site in Ayodhya, claimed by both Hindus and Muslims, witnessed the kind of violence unseen in India since the Partition of British India resulting in creation of India and Pakistan in 1947. The dispute over this site was not new, but after independence Indian government put a lock on it and out of bounds for both communities. The site in question is the Babri Masjid, a 16th century mosque erected by Babur, the founder of Mughal empire, allegedly on the ruins of a temple devoted to the birth of Lord Rama, a divinized hero of the famous epic the *Ramayana.* At different times, there used to be tensions and riots between two communities, but nothing at the scale of 1992 eruption of violence. The alleged pretext for this riot was the torching (by Muslims) of the compartment of a train at Godhra, killing over fifty devotees of Lord Rama who were returning from the pilgrimage in Ayodhya. That resulted in a complete demolition of the Babri mosque within just a few hours by all too zealous Hindu mobs, only to be followed by widespread communal riots that lasted for weeks resulting in over two thousand casualties, thousands of destroyed Muslim businesses and tens of thousands of people who were left homeless after their houses were burnt (Mazumdar 1995; Vijayalaksmi 2005).

What is of interest to us here is the participation of women in these violent events that pitted women from Hindu communities against those of Muslim ones. It was estimated that about one third of the so called 'voluntary workers' (*kar sevaks*) were women. What is it that precipitated such willingness of these women coopted by various rightwing Hindu organizations and political parties (like currently ruling BJP, among others) to take part in the demolition of the mosque and even more so in the riots that followed it? What type of ideological zeal makes some of those women proudly declare that they are the "sparks of fire" ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their Motherland epitomized in this case in the struggle to (re)build the temple to Rama on the ruins of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya? While the answer cannot be conclusive, "the error of intellectualism" has been recognized by women activist as a culprit revealing that paying greater attention to the activity of the movement's participants and their ideological or other presumptions would help "disclose contradictions that may be instrumental for the movement's functioning" (Rajagopal 2001: 212). Additionally, "[t]he affiliation to political parties also often restrains the coordination between women's organisations as the differences at the political level influence their networking" (Vijayalakshmi 2005: 9).

While in principle women's movement could benefit from their association with political parties by pushing women's issues into the party agenda and/

or by using the party networks, the mobilization of women by rightwing parties and organizations has convinced some *autonomous women's groups*[11] that such association incites the reactionary potential of women within these parties and does not do much to advance women's cause. Rather, the aggressive political activism of women associated with some of the rightwing parties has shattered a perception, held by some in women's movement, of women as inherently peace-loving, whose gender identity would override their ideological differences. The current BJP government and their allies, with their rhetoric crafted to encompass the spheres outside narrowly political (i.e., religious and cultural), are not helping to heal divisiveness and polarization in society, and such social atmosphere has become a matter of grave concern for women's activists and their organizations.

Conclusion

What transpires from this brief analysis of women's activism in contemporary India is that women's movement and organizations are only reflecting the same challenges that Indian society as a whole is currently experiencing. Namely, the foundational principles of an independent India are at stake here: its pluralistic and variously syncretic culture, as it has historically existed, as well as democracy and secularism proclaimed in its Constitution. Given the fact that gender identity has not taken sufficiently deep roots among women across different social groups, the agenda of women's movement based on their disadvantage has been relatively easily circumscribed by the politics of difference, which resulted in divisiveness among the activists and fragmentation of the movement in dealing with issues related to community identity politics – all at the expense of the initial concern about women's oppression and inequality. While the need for plural expression of women's activism is recognized as important, essentializing any particular identity may lead to the loss of shared agenda politics. In that sense, it is necessary to renegotiate the tension that exists between more universal concerns for women's rights and the specific contexts of their particular communal identities. This may require reaching over different dividing lines (caste, religious, political), and a fresh reevaluation of the consequences of women's mobilization for different political causes on the integrity of women's movement. This further requires better understanding of reasons and motivations of women to join different political parties and act within their agendas that may be directly opposed to their own interest and position in society as women.

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11   The autonomous women's associations, especially leftist leaning, prefer collaboration with various civil society organizations and movements. Their view is that political parties are by definition androcentric and not likely to support and lobby for women's issues. The objection by other women activists to their apolitical stance in addressing patriarchy is that autonomy does not work if you are marginalized, and that in some cases compromises may be more effective in advancing women's causes and, especially, their political and electoral representation (Vijayalakshmi 2005).

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Milica Bakić-Hajden

Ženski aktivizam u Indiji: pregovaranje o sekularizmu i religiji

Apstrakt

Posle sticanja nezavisnosti, sekularizam je u Indiji prihvaćen skoro kao nešto što se podrazumeva, a odbacivanje javnog ispoljavanja religijskog i kastinskog identiteta smatralo se glavnom odlikom ženskog pokreta. Međutim, već 1980-ih godina pretpostavka da se rodna pripadnost može uzeti kao ujedinjujući faktor ženskog pokreta dovedena je u pitanje pokazavši da žene iz različitih socijalnih (klasnih/kastinskih) i religijskih miljea razumeju, a ponekad i koriste, svoje identitete na načine koji se nužno ne rukovode nekom ideologijom (kao feminizam ili ljudska prava), nego mnogo neposrednijim interesima, pa čak i oportunizmom. Ovaj uvid je pokrenuo raspravu o novim strategijama u okviru ženskog aktivizma, naročito u kontekstu agresivnog političkog delovanja nekih ženskih grupa pri desno orijentisanim političkim partijama. Njihovo delovanje je poljuljalo sliku koju su neki imali o ženama kao suštinski miroljubivim, kao i uverenje da rodni identitet može da prevaziđe kastinsku i religijsku pripadnost žena u Indiji.

Ključne reči: ženski pokreti, Indija, politika identiteta, sekularizam, religijski nacionalizam, međureligijsko nasilje