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# 'Indigenizing' Feminist Theory in Indian Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

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In the consciousness of many anthropologists, their discipline has been in a state of crisis for some time. A number of factors are seen to have contributed to this crisis, among them the disappearance of anthropology's traditional object of study, self-consciousness regarding the historical interrelations of anthropology and imperialism, resistance to objectification by indigenous peoples, and practical problems of the reproduction of the discipline in times of acute economic recession.

One of the oft-recommended solutions to the problem is what is called 'indigenization', but a close look reveals that arguments on behalf of indigenization are rather variously grounded and have, therefore, different practical implications. I will briefly rehearse some of these in regard to Indian anthropology/sociology in general, and then go on to consider analogous arguments in respect of the indigenization of feminist theory in the South Asian context. I should add here, in case the order of my presentation conveys the idea that feminist theory is relatively dependent or derivative, that it is in discussions on the nature, role and relevance of feminist theory in the Indian context, rather than within social anthropology *per se*, that debate is at present most

vigorous. In fact, the question of the indigenization of feminist theory is now a major issue in the theory and practice of the women's movement in India, and it is certainly one which a feminist anthropology cannot afford to ignore.

## *Indigenizing Anthropological Theory*

A first argument on behalf of indigenization derives from the proposition that anthropological knowledge was historically developed as a mode of 'control' of 'other' peoples, as an instrument of imperialism and as a reflection of the colonial mind-set. This view, articulated so eloquently by Lévi-Strauss (1966), Kathleen Gough (1968) and many others, has found more recent support in writings influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, often *via* Edward Said (1978), and specifically in the recent anthology, *Writing Cultures* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Rather surprisingly, considering the vigour of subalternist historiography in India over the last decade or more, comparable critiques within anthropology and sociology have been relatively weak, though one can think of important exceptions (see Uberoi 1968), possibly because of unwelcome continuities between

colonial and post-colonial state policies, for instance, in respect of India's large tribal populations.

The second proposition has reference not so much to the politics as the culture of scientific knowledge. It is argued that anthropology has developed in a particular cultural context which has moulded it in distinctive ways, and that it is therefore inappropriate for application to non-Western societies. It embodies alien values (as in its validation of the philosophy of individualism), and fails to address the real problems of Indian society. At the same time, it imposes false problematics on Indian reality — I have in mind for instance the interpretation of Indian multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism (Uberoi and Uberoi 1976) — and generally results in mis-identification. The process of 'indigenization' is thus conceived as an integration of theory and practice, that is, rendering theory appropriate for the 'real' Indian environment. Oddly enough, as it happens, applied anthropology or sociology is relatively neglected within the academy, where the relevance of a subject is informally measured only by the degree to which it ensures success for students in the competitive government service entrance examinations! And though our students do sometimes plead for a greater engagement with current social and political issues, these embarrassing concerns are sternly banished from the academy, or else relegated to departments of social work. In the academy, commerce between applied and academic sociology is subtly but firmly discouraged, and one is soon persuaded that engagement with immediate social problems is liable to lead to a dilution of academic purism.

Thirdly is the argument that metropolitan anthropology has discounted as irrelevant Indians' own understanding of their society, substituting it with epistemologically alien conceptions. This assumption lies behind the well-publicized recent efforts by McKim Marriott and his students to formulate an 'ethnology' of India or — in its more sinister rendering — a conceptualization of India through 'Hindu' categories (Marriott 1990). This begins as it must with the 'reinvention' of the Indian (read the Hindu) tradition: Sanskritic, textually authorized and canonical, with what many critics regard as dangerous implications in the communally charged atmosphere of today. Interestingly, with the exception of a handful of Indians working in the academies abroad, or perhaps an Indian scholar seeking to correct Marriott's Sanskrit, Indian academics have

barely responded to this undeniably elegant attempt to 'cube the lotus' (a phrase attributed to Milton Singer). No doubt very few of them have taken the trouble to try and understand the principle of the famous 'cube' through which Marriott presented his model, but they have also not been convinced of the utility of doing so, or of the cube's possible relevance for addressing the issues with which they are engaged. Privately, they probably see it as presumptuous on Marriott's part to seek to legislate in this way for Indian sociology (ethno-sociology), but a full-blooded critique has not been forthcoming either. (By contrast, Louis Dumont, who in his own way proposed an ethnosociological view of Indian society over twenty years ago (1970), continues to be the 'straw man' that everyone feels obliged to attack — or defend.)

### *Indiginizing Feminist Theory*

I was made acutely conscious of the divorce between metropolitan theory and indigenously generated data a few years ago when I set out to design an M.A. course on "Women and society in India" (see Uberoi 1989-90). As usual with our courses, the syllabus was divided into two sections, an introductory section on theory and method, and a substantive section, so-called, on women in India. To my dismay, when I looked over my handiwork, I discovered that the theory section contained no readings at all by Indian authors. It was as though Indian scholars can at best provide illustrations for theoretical positions generated elsewhere, but not themselves aspire to contribute to an ecumenical feminist theory.

This example is drawn from pedagogy, but the hiatus is keenly felt within the Indian women's movement too, where academics, with their assumed privileged acquaintance with metropolitan feminist theory and the comparative literature, denigrate activists, and activists in reverse, the academy. Ultimately, only a few rare souls, in their personal lives, their writings and their political practice, are able to negotiate the awful chasm that has emerged separating theory and practice, metropolitan knowledge and indigenous experience, the academy and the world of action. The 'indigenization' of feminist theory is one response to this dilemma in the Indian context, and it is to this strategy that I address myself here.

Sometimes, indigenization appears as little more than a surrender to the heat and the dust — and the muddle — that is India. Researchers on the Indian women's movement, working usually within behavioral perspectives, have found it rather difficult to classify Indian women activists according to received categories (such as 'radical feminist', 'Marxist feminist', 'socialist feminist' and 'liberal feminist', etc.) — though not a few have tried. On the contrary, they find a considerable divorce between theory (stated ideological positions) and practice (the actual programmes of particular individuals and organizations). They note with some dismay that most activists appear to have only a shallow understanding of the theoretical 'issues at stake', to quote the title of a recent book on this theme (Shah and Gandhi 1992), the best that can be said in their defense being that they are 'inconsistent', rather than plain confused.

Insofar as one can identify a self-conscious move for indigenization, this takes several different forms which are, to my mind, structurally similar to those I have described for social anthropology in the south Asian context.

In the first place it is argued by some that 'metropolitan' feminist theory foregrounds issues which are not actually of real concern in India, and neglects or discounts — misidentifies — those that are. This was one of the main arguments of Madhu Kishwar, editor of India's best-known women's journal, *Manushi*, in a controversial recent statement: 'Why I do not call myself a feminist' (1990), to which she added the practical consideration that to take on the label 'feminist' was definitely a tactical mistake for the Indian women's movement. It would give the wrong signals, conjuring up images of militant bra-burning Western feminists, and would alienate potential political support. Of course, she was referring here to the question of sexual separatism, which is likely to become one of the major issues in the Indian women's movement. In particular, it remains a matter of dispute as to whether lesbianism is an obvious non-issue as far as Indian women are concerned, or whether on the contrary there is a conspiracy of silence on this issue on the part of women who call themselves feminists. Sexuality is a question that most would prefer not to raise; at least, not at the present stage of development of the Indian women's movement.

While critiquing 'patriarchy' as an institution, Indian feminists have been relatively gentle with men, and have on the whole welcomed their collab-

oration. This is usually construed, a little apologetically in mixed company with foreign feminists, as the natural outcome of the unique history of the Indian women's movement, which was interwoven with the Nationalist movement (Chitnis 1988). Ultimately getting it all 'on a plate', as it were, Indian women have felt no compelling need to identify men as the chief enemy: only 'patriarchy'. In fact in practice it is often other women (mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law), and not husbands, who are identified as the real objects of antagonism and resentment, despite psychiatrist Sudhir Kakar's testimony to a great 'battle of the sexes' at the level of the unconscious (1989). Other writers have seen the challenge in a slightly different way. They have posed the question: was there an Indian women's movement or a women's class consciousness before the enlightening influence of contemporary feminist theory? They argue that indeed there was, and that it is crucially important to understand and document the issues involved on their own terms. This is the thrust of much contemporary writing, especially around the question of religion, and it has not been easy for many of these writers, being personally opposed to religion and alarmed by the continuing communalization of Indian society, to find in religion, *bhakti* in particular, a mode of women's self-expression and emancipation — in the past, if not also today (see the *Manushi* special issue 1989 on *Women Bhakta poets*). Tharu and Lalita's monumental edited volume, *Women writing in India* (1991), is a major recent effort to recover the past of Indian women.

A second issue of debate at the present moment is the proposition that the portrayal of Indian women as victims of inhumane practices is a colonial construct whose manifest and latent function was — in the past — to justify the imperial mission, and in the present, to similarly endorse the leading role of Western feminism in scripting the agenda of the Third World women's movement. Rereadings of the literature of the social reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and of more recent debates as well, have demonstrated this with great clarity. Not only *sati*, but also female infanticide, infant marriage, *purdah*, temple dedication, ascetic widowhood, dowry — even polyandry and matriliney — were signifiers of a backward, inhumane and corrupt society, and justifications of the white man's burden and of state interventions.

This line of thinking has produced some very fine work (see e.g. the essays in Sangari and Vaid

1989). Unfortunately, conceding the force of the argument may also effectively legitimate, or at least romanticize, these very phenomena. It may not seem easy to endorse female infanticide, though recent pragmatic arguments on behalf of sex-selective amniocentesis come quite close to that (Kumar 1983), but the glamorization of the life of the courtesan or temple dancer is quite another matter: she lends herself to sentimentalization (Oldenburg 1991). Besides, concentrating all fire on colonial discourse merely deflects attention from the interrogation of either the pre-colonial or the post-colonial societies. A full forty-five years after Independence it is surely fatuous, if not criminally irresponsible, to blame British colonialism for contemporary pathologies in the relations of the sexes, as also in relations of the communities.

Finally comes the issue of whether or not contemporary Indian feminism discounts indigenous constructions of femininity. The problem is, what are (or were) these? Men's constructions of femininity, as in the *Laws of Manu*, or texts such as the *Stridharmapaddati* of Tryambakayajvan (Leslie 1989), or women's own consciousness, as presented in Tharu and Lalita's volume? Or is the woman's voice, as Veena Das has recently argued (Das 1989), independent of biological sex? Can there in fact be an Indian femininity, unmediated by factors of class, caste, community and culture region? Efforts to specify such an entity, as in the writings of the psychologists Sudhir Kakar (1978:ch.3) and Ashis Nandy (1980), are fraught with difficulties; the former characteristically authorizing his position by appeal to a potpourri of folk idioms, eclectically selected, the latter generalizing from the Bengali *bhadralok* (or *bhadramahila*) to 'India'. Many find these constructions unacceptably homogenizing and normativising, concealing as much as they disclose.

These are all areas of extremely vigorous debate between activists of the women's movement in India, and teachers and researchers in the academy. In many ways they evoke the arguments of women of colour within and against the dominant positions of the western feminist movement. They share the common perspective that exogenous models have distorted the understanding of Indian womanhood, which ought properly to be understood on her own terms, and her own ground, and through her own categories of understanding. Curiously, another conceptual possibility has been ignored here, and it is with this that I would like to conclude.

Writing recently an account of the history of 'kinship studies' in India (Uberoi, 1993), I had initially followed the usual strategy of outlining the theoretical moves and controversies in metropolitan anthropology, and then looking for their reflection in studies of family, kinship and marriage in India. I then decided to turn the question around, and try to reflect, dialectically or dialogically, on the history of 'India' in kinship studies. I was thinking here of Lewis Henry Morgan, whose attention to the similarities of structure of the Dravidian and north American kinship terminologies created 'kinship studies' as a scientific enterprise at the heart of professional anthropology; of Sir Henry Maine, who discovered in the Indian joint family the distinctive features of unilineal descent groups as 'corporations'; of W.H.R. Rivers, whose work among the Todas of South India demonstrated the functional interrelations of social institutions, and the potentiality of the 'genealogical method' of inquiry; or more recently of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in whose challenging new theory of kinship the Indian evidence was a crucial input; or more recently still of Louis Dumont, whose attempt to articulate the unity of Indian as a culture area brought important modifications in Alliance Theory.

In the field of gender studies in India there are also indications of such possibilities, and I will conclude by merely naming them: (a) eco-feminism, as a theoretical position and domain of interest; (b) an indigenous conceptualization of female power (*shakti*); (c) an indigenous theory of androgyny, as opposed to the assumption of sexual polarization; and (d) a recognition of plurality and heterogeneity, taking inspiration from the multiple feminine models of the Hindu pantheon.

At this point, I can only commend these issues as worthy of further attention, not because they are unproblematic, for most definitely they are not, but because their interrogation may well add something of value to the reconstitution of feminist theory; for that matter, perhaps to the remaking of anthropological theory as well.

## Notes

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