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## The women's movement in India (II): Feminist figures within the post-independence and its third phase

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### Abstract

The Indian Post-Independence period began with the partition of the country into India and Pakistan and the end of British colonization. Due to the new Indian government, India had to deal with the problem of mass migration from Pakistan and the resulting communal conflicts, including the problem of caste-based discrimination and violence against women. The environment among the populace encouraged social activists to develop throughout the post-independent period, which eventually led to the third phase of the Women's Movement's birth. This paper approaches the influence of the public activists who struggle towards the achievement of social issues during the Indian post-independence (from 1947) and the setting-up of the third phase of the Women's Movement.

**Keywords:** Women's movement, India, post-independence, third phase, post-colonial, feminist figures

### Introduction

The unification of the princely states, the 1947 Indian-Pakistani war, and the Kashmir dispute were only a few of the difficulties the new Indian administration under Jawaharlal Nehru had to deal with. On the other hand, the Indian Constitution, which went into effect on January 26, 1950, was intended to ensure that all citizens, regardless of caste, religion, or gender, would have equal rights and protection under the law. It might have included affirmative action for women and other disadvantaged groups. Even so, there was still a strong sense of inequity in India's society. In research from Mani (2016) <sup>[23]</sup>:

The post-independence silence in Indian women's activism was strengthened by a standoff between those activists advocating for the supremacy of state-enforced secular law and those advocating for the autonomy of various sectarian community laws. The question at hand was whether women's rights should be determined and legislated by the state discourse of liberal humanist rights and individual freedom or by community discourses of cultural continuity and spiritual salvation (22)

Because of this, women's rights made major advancements in the decades after independence. In 1955, the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to codify Hindu law, was approved. This gave women the right to property and led to the legal acknowledgment of divorce and widow remarriage. In 1961, the Dowry Prohibition Act was passed, making the practice illegal and punished. Discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which made it unlawful to discriminate against women in the workplace, was established in 1972 as a result of this Act.

In addition to being distinct from other eras, the third phase of the Women's Movement in India in the late 1970s was also more radical in its outlook. The issues encountered by women from lower social groups and castes were of particular concern to the feminists of this era. Indeed, it would be the rural women the ones who raise the beginning of the third phase of the Women's Movement with the Chipko Movement. Internationally known as ecofeminism, in the words of Mack-Canty (2004) <sup>[22]</sup> it is a movement started by women of Himalayan India during the 70s with the aim of protecting their forests in a non-violent way (165), since the issue of violence was disturbing them significantly. Furthermore, the growth of numerous women's organizations was another development in the third phase of the Indian feminist movement. These organizations fought for the advancement of women from lower social groups and castes.

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Additionally, they were attempting to stop violence towards women. Some of the most remarkable figures that would contribute to the raise of the third phase of the Women's Movement in India are Padma Gole, Durgabai Deshmukh, Manikuntala Sen, Amrita Pritam, Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar, Devaki Jain, Jasodhara Bagchi, Prem Chowdhry, Theilina Phanbuh, Brinda Karat, Gita Sen, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Vandana Shiva, Ramarao Indira, Anuradha Ghandy, Medha Patkar, Ruth Vanita, Gita Sahgal, Uma Narayan, Nivedita Menon, Sharmila Rege, and Rita Banerji. This paper introduces them in a chronological order, according to their year of birth.

### **Public activists after the post-independence and the third phase of the Women's Movement in India**

Padma Gole (1913-1998) was an Indian independence activist from Maharashtra who came from a family of middle-class women who had greater economic opportunities than women from the lower classes, "whose writings faithfully depicted the domestic lives of Indian middleclass women" (Mohi Ud Din Wani 162) [28]. It was a woman supporting the feminist movement through her literary work from her Brahmin perspective. As maintained by Sisir Kumar:

The monotonous domestic duties with the regularity expected from the animals and the bonded labourers, and the privations and the indignities [as] the features of women life in the Indian middle-class homes. The intimate and authentic portrayals of women's life within domestic situations are to be seen in the writings of women authors [such as] Padma Gole (330).

Padma created poetry rich of allusions alluding to Hindu Gods and Goddesses, telling unorthodox scenarios that challenged religious books' tradition, for example, Padma writes about "the significance of the *Lakshmanarekha* which [alludes] to all Indian women symbolizing the limits that must be crossed" (Domergue, 1997) [10] in the following poem:

Lakshmana drew but one line  
in front of Sita.  
She crossed over it  
the result was the Ramayana.  
We face Lakshmanarekhas  
on all sides.  
They have to be crossed  
The Ravannas confronted (Domergue, 5)

Durgabai Deshmukh (1909-1981) was an Indian social worker who formed the Andhra Mahila Sabha in 1948, a non-governmental organization dedicated to improving children's education and health, particularly in rural areas, as well as women's empowerment, "Durgabai's early life epitomised the struggle of many upper-caste, spirited women to whom the freedom movement provided an opportunity to break out of oppressive social norms, and seek creative avenues for self-fulfillment and leadership without the opprobrium of being perceived as "selfish" or "self-centered" (Mazumdar 2). She was a devout Gandhi supporter. After India's independence in 1947, she battled against the imposition of English as a subject in schools as one of her supporting causes during a period of search for

Hindu identity, "within the nation, her priorities were clear and consistent-her obligations were to all those oppressed by poverty, ignorance and oppressive social institutions. In her own words, the political awakening of the freedom movement provided "the renaissance of Indian womanhood" (Mazumdar 2).

Manikuntala Sen (1911-1987) was a political activist who became a key position in the Communist Party of India in the 1930s, "she read communist literature and became ready to join the Communist Party. She remained convinced about the communist ideology to the end of her life, though she left active politics after the Communist Party split in the 1960s" (Ghosh 110). She was one of the party's early female activists, and she was instrumental in organizing female workers. In her memories, thanks to her education and enrollment in the CPI, as described by Loomba, she "tended to talk about [her] early life experiences, [her] education, and how [she] grew to political consciousness; peasant women, by contrast, did not have any elaborate narratives of education, childhood and development" (8). However, at the same time she became aware of her status and, "she decenters herself as she charts her journey from a middle-class urban activist to an organizer of some of the poorest and most deprived sections of the Indian population" (Loomba 27). Since she realized the Communist Party in India during the sixties had a patriarchal hierarchy and did not allow women to stay ahead, she tried to reform and criticized the way in which society oppressed women even in her own party, that is one of the reasons why she was concerned about creating a new system and building new regulations: "for Manikuntala, 'modernity' seems to be constructed around breaking social hierarchies and taboos, and abandoning long-followed orthodoxies. She breaks the class barriers by consorting with and even living in the houses of low-caste and poor villagers and the industrial poor" (Ghosh 117).

Amrita Pritam (1919 - 2005) was a poet and writer from Punjab who wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. She is regarded as the first female Punjabi author to publish novels and poems in the Punjabi language in British India. She was alive during India's 1947 independence, which affected her literary work:

As for direct influences, I can say that the partition of our country had a great influence on my writing. At that period when I saw the suffering of thousands and thousands of people, especially women because they suffered in a special way, I was very moved. I wrote a full novel on that theme [...] I also wrote a number of poems and a few short stories on this theme. Those poems have been read in Pakistan and in India because of the genuine pain I express in them (Coppola and Pritam 7).

In 1956, she became the first woman to win the Sahitya Akademi Award for Literature, an annual literary award given by India's National Academy of Letters to authors of the best books of literary quality published in any of the 24 main Indian languages, "thanks to her long poem called *Sunehade* ('Messages' in English)" (News18).

Neera Desai (1925 - 2009) was an Indian feminist researcher who contributed to the feminist movement via her research, professional career, and writings, she "evokes respect and admiration among scholars interested in

women's issues in India. Her soft voice, polite ways and traditional sari are as much a part of her personality as her determination to promote academic excellence and build institutions to support women's studies" (Forbes and Thakkar 492). She was born in the British Raj period in Mumbai. She saw India's Independence, a goal for which her family and she had fought for many years, "she always walked the talk and lent her support for campaigns to release political prisoners and to oppose draconian laws that repressed the democratic rights" (Patel 12). Desai founded the Research Unit for Women's Studies in 1975, a few years after completing her PhD in sociology which "was welcomed by critics as a seminal contribution that provided historical understanding on the status of Indian women from the Vedic period to the early years of independent India" (Patel 11), and the Indian Association for Women's Studies in 1982 (IAWS). Desai was a prolific writer who wrote extensively on a variety of women's studies topics, including women's health, education, work, and political engagement. She was also active in a number of women's social work programs and worked closely with women who supported Mahatma Gandhi's liberation cause.

Vina Mazumdar (1927 – 2013) was an Indian economist and feminist who lived from 1927 until 2013. She was the first woman to chair the Indian Planning Commission and a co-founder of the Centre for Women's Development Studies. Mazumdar was born in the city of Calcutta in the year 1927. During her life she published in her work her perspective about the feminist movement in India, advocating it was heterogeneous, but a necessary change for women worldwide, "research on women is not new but the studies offer a variety of concern with shifting emphasis and perspectives, depending on one's theoretical orientation, ideological alignments, changes in the contemporary situation and in priorities for social and national development" (Mazumdar and Sharma 133). She worked as an economist for the Indian government after studying economics at the University of Calcutta. She co-founded the Centre for Women's Development Studies, a gender equality study organization, in 1974. Her depiction about the nationalism and feminism and how the first one disallows the struggle of the second one is almost weekly published in her articles claiming that "this posed conflicts between their new rights and the values carefully promoted by a longstanding patriarchal social hierarchy. Social disabilities and gradual isolation from the politico-ideological struggles that were shaping the nation-building process led to the fragmentation of the women's movement and the women's" (Mazumdar: 1869). She considered the political role of women within the nationalist movement since The Independence of India essential to understand how women struggled from the inside and offered an alternative path to the ideology imposed by the conservative politicians who defended Hindutva movement. In the manner of Mazumdar and Kasturi:

The political role of women as a subject for research is of recent origin in India.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that there are so few studies of women's role in the nationalist movement or of the implications social or political-of their momentous entry into the public sphere. Important works on the national movement mostly fail to examine the significance of women's participation in the struggles (1).

History of feminism can be analyzed from different views, although the academia uses to focus on the opposite group to nationalist movement and their struggle to change women's role in society.

Devaki Jain (1933) is an Indian feminist who advocates for a more economic approach to the movement. At the Delhi School of Economics, she was the first woman to be recruited as a full professor. She is one of the *Casablanca* movement's supporters, "an initiative of women from the Global South - activists and academics - seeking solutions for empowering women who increasingly carry the burden of worldwide poverty" (Casablanca). In her last novel published in 2005, Devaki debates about the relation between feminism and politics, reflecting about the differences between feminism and equality. As Jain describes in her book:

The term "women," or the women word, as an attempt to envelop the political identity "women." In feminist discourse, each word such as "women," each construct such as "gender," and each identification such as "feminist" is being contested. Each of these terms has different definitions and politics. While every phase of the evolution of language has had its value, there is now, in 2005, an increasingly accepted view that to reclaim political identity, to affirm women's collective political will, the word "women" has returned as preferred currency (5).

She was also very concerned about the real inclusion of women in the world of work defending their rights, bringing back the American 1970s term "feminization of poverty" which, in her own words would be "the increase of women among the poor, to the point where there were more women among the poor than men due to proportion of female-headed households and the rise of female participation in low-return, informal-sector activities in urban areas" (Jain: 2005, 107) <sup>[16]</sup>.

Jasodhara Bagchi (1937–2015) was a prominent independent Indian feminist academic, novelist, critic, and activist. She was the founder and director of Jadavpur University's School of Women's Studies, as well as one of the founders of Sanchetana, a non-profit women's organization in Kolkata. She focused on the impact of nationalism on gender education in India. As reported by Jain (2005) <sup>[16]</sup>:

Bagchi was known for her leftist ideology and her undying commitment to the mobilization of women's movement in the country, in line of which she established the feminist organization, Sanchetna, in the city of Kolkata, thereby, helping in amplifying the countless voices of women raised for their rights and dignity (54)

She saw motherhood as central to the development of women's identity and the social deconstruction of gender roles in India during the colonial and post-colonial periods, because women were the most powerful creature, not because of their ability to give birth, but because of their abilities in every field within the social system. According to Jasodhara Bagchi:

One may say that the ideology of motherhood served to delineate the gendered class-caste and ethnic border of the burgeoning middle-class consciousness. To come to grips with feminism in the Indian context the significance of motherhood is immense. There is no doubt that Indian feminists are in a unique position as far as placing motherhood at the centre (31-32).

Prem Chowdhry, born in 1944, is an Indian social scientist and artist who exposes the Indian judicial system's indifference and unfairness to women. She specializes in gender studies as well as political and economic history, "The failure of the judicial system in ensuring effective protection of the right to choose in marriage, especially in the face of a modern equitable law, and/or collusion of the state agencies in sabotaging this right, is assuming alarming and dangerous proportions" (Chowdhry). In terms of her professional career as a researcher, she has published seven books, all of which depict and criticize the historical situation of women in relation to the economy, marriage, and politics, patriarchal demands, marriage legitimation between two adults, and a variety of other social issues, up until 2011. The studies of the Bedia women community, for example, is highly intriguing since a large number of them operate as sex-workers and combine their employment with their personal lives:

Increasingly, there is pressure on Bedia women to force their clients to use condoms, not as a reproductive contraceptive but as a precaution against HIV/AIDS. Women routinely assert that they do not entertain any clients who refuse to use condoms. But for Bedia women condom usage with the husband, or with any man whom they treat as a husband, is unimaginable (232 Chowdhry).

Focusing on her artistic side, she has built a successful art career by self-teaching and displaying her paintings in prestigious art galleries such as the Indian National Gallery, which depict the actual sentiments of women and the restoration of their rights in today's society, "such earliest paintings done with red sand stones are found in India in primitive caves and rock-shelters in Mirzapur and Banda in Uttar Pradesh, in the Mahadev hills of the Vindhya range in Bundelkhand, in the Kaimur hills in the Andhra Pradesh of Bagelkhand, in Singanpur in Raigarh district of Central India and Bellary in South India" (Jayetilleke, 2004).

Theilin Phanbuh born in Meghalaya, is an Indian social worker and "the chairperson of the Meghalaya State Commission for Women and Padma Shri awardee" (Mohi Ud Din Wani 5) <sup>[28]</sup>. The Meghalaya State Commission for Women (MSCW) is a women's rights organization in Meghalaya, India. In 1993, the commission was constituted. It has the authority to investigate any issues concerning women's welfare and offer recommendations to the government. The panel is made up of four government-appointed members. For instance, in 2015, as the person ahead The MSCW, Theilin Phanbuh denounced the irregular death of a tribal woman inside a police station, "We have sought a report from the police that deputed a team to the place where the incident took place. We are awaiting the report" (Press Trust of India). Another national programme Phanbuh expressed her concern about, as the chairperson of The MSCW is the 1985 vaccination project for children,

which was committed to assist and include all Indian childhood, although, "Phanbuh expressed concern over non-inclusion of women in the Village Council, as they could immensely contribute on matters relating to health care" (The Shillong Times), while the government seems to avoid the situation and take a long time.

Brinda Karat is an Indian communist politician who is a member of the Communist Party of India's Politburo (Marxist). While studying at Miranda House, Delhi University, Karat became interested in student politics. As it has been shown although caste system was abolished since the Independence of India in 1947, in practice the reality shows the opposite, since there are prejudices and an undercover structure of castes by population and politicians. Nevertheless, "neither does Karat support caste-based political parties since they feed off caste oppression to garner political gain. Instead, she argues that unity demands that middle class women must join the resistance against caste oppression" (Armstrong 232-233). In 1970, she became a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). From 1993 to 2004, she served as the general secretary of the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). Following Karat:

Adivasi displacement does not just affect livelihood but destroys cultures and a way of life. The status of women in particular is badly affected as they become refugees living in an environment far removed from the more democratic framework of their own cultures, thus facing a reduction in status in different spheres (31).

She is a committed defense of Adivasi women, who often use to be victims of domestic violence physical, sexual or emotional abuse by their husbands and hardly ever seek help, either from family or authorities. Brinda Karat has stated that it is time to end the silence and demand change from her political position.

Gita Sen is an Indian feminist academic who has spent her career as a professor developing techniques to aid women's education, health, population policy, and gender and development. She has taught at Harvard University as well as international organizations such as the United Nations. "How do essential structural dimensions of gender inequality affect women's health and what should be the priority actions to protect women's human rights and to expand women's opportunities and capabilities?" (Sen and Östlin 17), all these questions are answered by Sen among her publications, from which the most remarkable ones are *Gender Equity in Health* (2010), *Women's Empowerment and Demographic Processes* (2000), and *Population Policies Reconsidered* (1994), all of which focus on the health abuses and lack of policies that disproportionately affect Indian women and girls, "addressing the problem of gender inequality requires actions both outside and within the health sector because gender power relations operate across such a wide spectrum of human life and in such interrelated ways" (Sen and Östlin 24). Besides, she along her articles she connects women's empowerment with her resources and self-confidence, the more stuff, the better:

In whatever order change occurs, true empowerment includes typically to both elements and is rarely sustained without either. A change in access to external resources without a change in consciousness can leave

people without the flexibility, motivation and attention to retain and/or build on over that control, leaving an open space for others to gain it (Sen 2).

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (born 1950) is an Indian feminist writer and post-colonial studies professor claiming that “Postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women’s lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights” (Lozano 53). She has a large number of works on feminism and gender studies in India, and she has shared her expertise in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Rajan has written extensively on the subject of feminism as a response to the quest for Hindu identity. *Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?* (1997), *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism* (2003), and *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in India* (2003) are just a few of her publications where she contextualizes postcolonial feminism in India and the different relations about the citizenship and the political projects and narratives produced during this period of discovering the new ideologies; “those who assert that the Hindu goddess is feminist celebrate, first, the Hindu religion’s richness and plurality of traditions. In contrast to the singular patriarchal god of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Vedic Hinduism had female deities and (arguably) a matriarchal worldview” (Sunder Rajan 3).

Vandana Shiva (1952) is an environmental activist and thinker from India who has written about the effects of economic globalization on the environment, agriculture, and food security. Shiva was born in the Indian city of Dehradun in the year 1952. She graduated from the University of Western Ontario in Canada with a Ph.D. in quantum physics in 1982. She became active in the Chipko movement after returning to India, a nonviolent resistance effort to defend forests from being clear-cut. She then became an outspoken advocate and promoter of ecofeminism (feminist movement born in France and descendent from Chipko in India). According to Shiva *et al.*, the “ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing” (14) and therefore the term is directly linked to women, due to as living creatures have been mistreated and abused for thousands of years as well as nature; “we are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperiled times. We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns” (Shiva *et al.* 14) [37]. Besides, Shiva founded the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology, a non-profit organization in India that supports sustainable development, an independent research institute which approaches the most critical problems of contemporary ecology, and two years later, Navdanya (‘nine seeds’) the movement in defense of biodiversity and small farmers. Navdanya, the movement for biodiversity protection and farmer rights, was also founded by her.

Ramarao Indira (1952) was born in Mysore, Karnataka. She is an Indian sociologist, “academic, critic, and rationalist expert in modern feminism thoughts. She has written many articles and books on feminism in Kannada and English” (Mohi Ud Din Wani 163) [28]. She is the director of the

University of Mysore's International Centre and Honorary Director of the Centre for Women's Studies. She is a well-prepared academic with an M.A. and a PhD, demonstrating her understanding of the current Indian system's origins. Ramarao Indira has authored and co-authored a number of books, including *Themes in Sociology of Education* (2011), *Environment, Forestry and Gender: A Select Bibliography* (2001), or *Gender and Society in India* (1999) among many other publications. On the words of Indira:

Narratives are often rejected as storytelling and without a sound methodological and theoretical base, but my premise is that narratives can provide a strong basis for reconstructing and revisiting our theories and methods. Sociological discourse on issues of subaltern identities and the challenges of those living on the margins is incomplete without using the narrative method (1)

Her position as a lecturer at Karnatak University enabled her to develop social initiatives to investigate Indian society following colonial impacts, “dominant discourse paradigms in sociology are generally established as the only acceptable theoretical framework within which sociological studies are located” (Indira 2).

Anuradha Ghandy (1954 –2008) was an Indian journalist and communist politician. She was born in Mumbai, Maharashtra, in 1954 to a socialist Maharashtrian family, “Anuradha Ghandy [...] was a university lecturer in the department of Sociology. While she died of cerebral malaria, she was the leader of all-India women’s movement and the sole member of Central Committee” (Reviewer and Parmar 5). She was a courageous woman who stood out for the underprivileged and downtrodden. In her home state of Maharashtra, Ghandy was a founding member of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of India. In her post mortem book *named Philosophical Trends in the Feminist Movement* (2016) she makes a critique and historical analysis about the history of the feminist movement and categories them into Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Lesbianism, Anarcha-Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Socialist Feminism, and Post-modern Feminism. In addition, she summarizes her analysis with the idea that:

The main weaknesses in their theory and strategies were: Seeking roots of women’s oppression in her reproductive role. Since women’s role in reproduction is determined by biology, it is something that cannot be changed. Instead of determining the material, social causes for origin of women’s oppression they focused on a biologically given factor thereby falling into the trap of biological determinism (105).

Medha Patkar (1954) is an Indian social activist who has focused her efforts on environmental concerns, water resources, and the rehabilitation of individuals impacted by huge dams, particularly women who live in rural regions and own farms and have had their property and livelihoods threatened:

A basic principle was that the peoples’ representatives should accompany the activists every time we met officials. We realized, when the representatives, who had never gone to the *tehsil* [subdistrict] area before, started raising these issues, some of the more honest

government employees had to concede that they had no answers (Fisher 159).

Patkar was born in 1954 in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and graduated in 1976 from the Parul Institute of Arts and Science in Vadodara, Gujarat. She joined the Movement for the Survival of the Oraon People (MOSOP) in 1984 after working as a teacher for a few years, and then co-founded the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) in 1990. She has researched about the industrialization on India and its impact on poor people, "it must be recognized that the benefits of industrialization come unacceptably slowly to the poor, because creation of jobs in industry proceeds at a slow pace due to mechanization and rationalization of production in large industries" (Bhaduri and Patkar 10-11) She has been in the forefront of a number of agitations and campaigns, including the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which seeks to rehabilitate those who have been harmed by the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. She has also spoken out against the forced relocation of people for the sake of economic growth, and she has criticized the government.

Ruth Vanita was born in 1955. She is a British and Indian literary historian with an emphasis on gender and queer studies. She is also an activist and author. Vanita was born in Rangoon, Myanmar, and received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Delhi. She traveled to the United States after teaching at Delhi University, where she became a Professor of English in Montana, where she was in charge of South Asian post-colonial and queer studies. Vanita tends to compare US with Indian society, confronting both societies proving their weaknesses are not as dissimilar as they might be thought, "furthermore, focusing on atrocities, as the media tend to do both in India and the West, functions both to threaten and to reassure most women. The average woman is subliminally persuaded that she should be grateful if her husband does not beat or kill her, while she is also reminded that he might have the power to treat her in these ways" (Vanita 2). Vanita has published extensively on queer studies, including the first book on the subject in any language, *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2000), "Furthermore, while lesbian and gay marriage is increasingly prevalent in Western countries, the modern critique of patriarchal marriage as an institution emerged from feminism in those same Western countries and is partially shared by many feminists in India today" (Kidwai 215). She's also written or co-edited many collections of gender and sexuality writings, including *Queering India* (2002), where she expresses the necessity of research Indian popular culture which might be full of interpretations and signs of queerness:

The seeming absence of a recognizable gay/lesbian cinema need not undermine the relevance of queer mass culture studies in India. Neither should such studies be limited to the few recent Hindi films with overt "queer" representations. On the contrary, such studies need to venture beyond the overtly articulated, and explore the unnamed expressions of queerness that structure popular culture in this part of the world (Vanita 181).

She is a Women's Studies instructor and a patron of the Humsafar Trust, a Mumbai-based organization that works

on HIV/AIDS and sexual health concerns among India's homosexual and transgender people.

Gita Sahgal, a British Indian journalist and women's rights campaigner, was born in 1956. In the early 1980s, Sahgal began her career as a journalist. "The Guardian," "The Observer," "The New Statesman," and "The Independent" are among the magazines for which she has worked. She has also published a number of works on women's rights and feminism, in which she contrasts women's situation with that of the nationalist British state. She has published many articles analyzing the history of women and the ideology of *Hindutva*, expressing her conclusions such as:

Hindutva's success is not simply due to the failures of the secular parties, but to its colonizing of a radical Universalist ideal embedded in Indian nationalism which had propelled opposition to imperialism abroad and a commitment to an egalitarian polity at home. For Hindutva's success to be maintained and deepened, this story of independent India has to be paid obeisance to, at the same time as its secular ethos is being dismantled through violence, intimidation on the streets, in cyber space and through political maneuver (Sahgal 44)

In her research, Sahgal argues the success of Hindutva nowadays in India and the strategy used by politicians to gain the confidence of the citizenship rejecting British colonization and creating a feeling of reminiscence towards a mistaken idea of what being a Hindu is. Besides, according to Cowden and Sahgal:

When discussing the emergence of religious fundamentalism above we noted an obsessive focus on questions of 'honour' and 'personal morality' with regard to women, demonstrating the way women's deportment, dress and behaviour had become in effect a communal symbol which needed to be rigidly policed. [...] This discussion builds on the points we have already made about the significance of neoliberal economics in destroying forms of life which existed in a state of relative stability for generations through the imposition of new capitalist social relations (29).

Sahgal is a co-founder of the Centre for Secular Space, which promotes secularism and protects religious and ethnic minorities' rights. She has also spoken out against religious fundamentalism being used as a justification for violence and persecution.

The law and philosophy professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Uma Narayan (born at the end of the 1950s) is most recognized for her work on the relationship between gender, culture, and development. She was a key figure in the formation of Third World feminism. Narayan has written extensively on how traditional gender cultural norms might hinder women's access to school, job, and other essential rights. She's also argued for the inclusion of a feminist viewpoint in development theory and practice, emphasizing the need of comprehending how women's experiences differ from nation to country and culture to culture: "many Third-World feminists confront the attitude that our criticisms of our cultures are merely one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of "privileged native women in whiteface", seeking to attack their "non-Western culture" on the basis of "Western"

values” (Narayan 3). *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (1997) together with a high number of papers on feminism and development, cross-cultural comparisons, and the effects of globalization on women's lives:

Once again, let me try to illustrate what I mean with example. I have heard more than once from white feminists the following account of the differences between western and non-western feminist agendas. The gist of it is that non-western women are concerned with life and death issues like food, drinking water, etc. and have no time to be concerned with issues like that of sexual autonomy that are of concern to western feminists (44).

This is the reason why feminism has many branches and approach the struggle of social equality and women's right from different paths.

A parallel figure to the last one is Nivedita Menon, a feminist thinker and activist who has written extensively on gender and sexuality, was born in 1958. She is presently a professor at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, where she has taught since 2009. She earned her bachelor's degree in political theory from the University of Delhi's Miranda House College, and her PhD in political theory from the same university. Nivedita Menon has been an activists revindicating a new gender conception, also campaigning in the streets, “thanks to small feminist interventions [...] memberships in various women's study circles, and further studies in JNU, Nivedita gradually became convinced that her true calling was in academia” (Dixit). She is a well-known feminist thinker and activist in India, and she has written extensively about gender and sexuality.

Menon has been an outspoken opponent of the Indian government's policy on women and gender equality. She criticized the Indian government's "paternalistic and protectionist" approach toward women in a 2013 article, claiming that it does more damage than good by promoting the idea that women are weak and in need of protection:

Women have dealt with these limiting and confining spaces in many ways—by enduring them, by claiming them to be meaningful and powerful, by acquiring some power through manipulation of what is available, by breaking out of and rejecting them and moving into the wider space of the world (Menon 475)

She also criticizes that even using the term queer and giving visibility to alternative genders, there is a step backwards for Indian women within this group, who are still marginalize and silenced; “while for most people who specifically use the term ‘queer’, violence against lesbians and lesbian issues are very much a part of the agenda, there still is space for a lesbian/ feminist critique” (Menon 100), since there is a lower risk of contracting illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, “thus, the ‘biologically female’ body and the ‘gendered female’ body exist in tension with each other at the intersection of feminist and queer politics” (Menon 100). Menon is also a vocal supporter of transgender people's rights. She argued in a 2016 essay that the Indian government's choice to uphold a legislation criminalizing transgender individuals was a breach of their human rights. She also urged the Indian

government to do more to defend transgender people's rights.

Sharmila Rege (1964 – 2013) was an Indian sociologist and feminist academic known for her writings and active work in the field of Dalit women and gender studies. Her book *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* published in 2006, where she analyses Dalit literature and all the Indian Caste system as a whole:

Recognizing differences, power and connections of class, caste and community means transforming subjectivities, politics and pedagogies. At the level of practice, for those of us who have been complicit in the power and privileges of caste, one of the first realizations is our lack of knowledge of cultures that have been violently marginalized. A large part of the feminist discourse of experience has been an autobiography of the upper caste woman, her conflict with tradition and her desire to be modern (Rege 4).

Rege began her academic career as a lecturer and the chair of the Gender Studies Department at Pune University. Aside from her work as a novelist, she has published articles in journals explaining the nature of the feminist dispute as a category, concluding that the word has been related to the struggle of upper-class women, “since many of the vocal feminists of the 1970s were white, middle class and university educated, it was their experience which came to be universalized as ‘women's experience’. Thus, sweeping statements such as ‘all women are niggers’ and ‘all women are Dalits’ were made” (Rege, 1).

Rita Banerji (1967) is an Indian novelist, photographer, and social activist who focuses on gender and sexuality problems in India. She was born in the year 1967. Her studies in the United States and India have provided her with a global perspective on women's history and present conditions. She also adds to the academy by reflecting on the portrayal of sex in Indian commercial cinema, she writes:

While the general opinion attributes this to a traditional society's rejection of relationships based on ‘sex,’ and India's censor board affirms that idea by zealously censoring films, a close examination of Bollywood films shows that female sexuality is often shrewdly used to hard sell films. Sex is actually not the real glitch in the stagnant embattled lovers plot, nor is male sexuality. The idea that is unpalatable to Indian films, is the same one that Indian society cannot digest: that of female sexuality as a woman's independent identity and choice (20).

Banerji is the originator of *The 50 Million Missing Campaign*, the world's greatest grassroots effort to halt women's genocide, with over 211 nations supporting it:

More than 50 million women have been systematically exterminated from India's population in three generations, through the gender-specific infliction of violence in various forms, such as female feticide through forced abortions, female infanticides, dowry murders, and honor killings (The 50 Million Missing Campaign).

The campaign is named after the estimated 50 million Indian girls and women who have gone missing as a result of sex-selective abortion, infanticide, and neglect over the last few decades. Its main purpose is raising public awareness about the tragic situation of women in India and the international support to avoid the situation.

### Conclusion

The commitment and resilience of activists during the second and third phase of the Indian Women's Movement was more radical and aimed at achieving equality in all spheres of life. The publications during the third phase of the Indian Women's Movement were also more abundant and aimed at bringing about change within society. The feminist activists already described are crucial in the third phase of the Women's Movement in India because they are the ones who are working to bring about change within society. They are raising awareness about the issues faced by women and are working to bring about equality for all women. Among them, scholars, authors, and artists associated with this phase of the Women's Movement would be essential in helping to spread the message of equality and justice for all women.

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