

We will fight, we will win

लड़ेंगे जीतेंगे

Indian women's movements and
struggles against violence



gender
atwork



weave
Weaving stories from the margins

(Below) A quilt crafted by Mary Ellsberg for the WEAVE Collective. The images are from a 2020 calendar created by Feminist Halla, a group of Indian feminists committed to breaking the silence around sexual violence.

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Foreword

This report is part of the WEAVE project, a collective endeavour by feminist researchers, activists and activist-researchers from four countries – Australia, India, Nicaragua and South Africa – to document women's movements against sexual violence and their impacts on policies in our respective countries.

The project was launched just before the Covid pandemic. The lockdowns that followed upended all our familiar routines and left both of us struggling to stay abreast of our commitments. But as the initial phase of anxiety and confusion transformed into a prolonged period of remote working, we were also creating spaces of deep introspection. The straightforward idea that we started with morphed into a more complicated exercise of revisiting and reassessing the histories of women's movements against violence and their engagements with the state.

We have focused on the stories and experiences of women who are subordinated by multiple hierarchies of power and privilege. We have mapped out some landmark struggles, starting from flashpoints and back-stories, and tracked subsequent actions and events in the law courts, movement spaces, the media, the public sphere, state institutions and policy spaces. These storylines also surface changes in the larger landscape – the expansion of feminist framings of justice and accountability, the evolution of movement strategies of mobilisation and alliance-building, and their impacts on legal and policy frameworks.

We have tried to weave together multiple strands of enquiry, information and analysis – oral histories and personal accounts from movement actors, commentary and critiques by feminist scholars, accounts in popular media, campaign materials, court proceedings, judgements, audiovisual records and a range of formal and informal writings. Most of these materials are embedded in the document.

This document is neither comprehensive or complete. More than a report, we see it as the beginning of a virtual archive that can be (and hopefully will be) collectively interrogated, critiqued, expanded and enriched by movement activists, feminist scholars and all those who have been part of these collective journeys and shared histories.

Uma and Kalyani

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Our grateful thanks to all those who shared their experiences and insights on the issues and struggles documented in this report.

Your reflections have infused and enriched our work. We have been inspired and touched by your openness and generosity in recounting your histories of struggle.

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|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
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Archiving Indian women's movements

As Indian women's movements spread across the country and the sub-continent in the 1970s and 80s, the beginnings of an archive began to take shape.

● Fragile ephemera – hastily put together posters, painted slogans on newspapers stuck onto squares of wood or cardboard so they could be hoisted high above our heads at demonstrations, lengths of cloth with catchy slogans finger-painted in bright colours; leaflets printed on the cheapest (and therefore thinnest) paper available, with information and analysis of the issue and our demands. All these took many hours to produce, since every nuance of form and content, the placement of every comma and fullstop was furiously debated.

We have a visual record of these early years, thanks to Sheba Chhachhi, a feminist activist, photographer and installation artist who carried her camera to every demonstration and protest, alternating between shouting slogans and jumping the police barriers to take photos from the other side. Her photographs have become iconic images of our foremothers and our histories, and a window into feminist ways of seeing and “performing the real”.

Yet, most of these carefully-crafted materials vanished soon after the demonstration – lying torn on the street as we were hauled away by the police, or stacked in a corner of a crowded office, dusty and forgotten. Occasionally, one or other of the more durable posters printed or painted on thicker paper would be carefully laid flat and stashed away under a mattress in someone's home.

Were the women who joined these demonstrations and protests aware that they were making history? If the songs they sang and the slogans they shouted are any indication, the women who poured out onto the streets in those early years were very clear about the goal: to smash patriarchy.

An iconic song from those days, the unofficial anthem of Indian women's movements, is like a warning to society: “Watch out, people – we women are coming to break the silence, sweep away the darkness and create a new world of equality and peace.”

But no one had time to collect, curate and preserve these bits of our history, because there was always another protest to be organised, another leaflet to be written, another set of posters to be produced, another song to be rehearsed in yet another all-night session in someone's house or garage.

A creative collaboration that lit up South Asia

Bindia Thapar, an architect by training and an illustrator by choice, and Kamla Bhasin were friends and collaborators in a creative partnership that left an indelible imprint on South Asian feminists. Dubbing themselves “Posterwaliyan” (“Poster-women”) they produced a stream of feminist posters that have been translated into all South Asian languages. Children’s books written by Kamla and brought to colourful life by Bindia were vehicles that carried feminist ideas couched in a homespun idiom into government schools and working-class households where they sparked many animated conversations and even some quiet revolutions.

These ad hoc production methods and ephemeral graffiti were gradually overtaken by more professionally produced visual materials reflecting a sophisticated understanding of the aesthetics of visual communication. Many of these materials were produced by women’s groups that emerged from movements in the 1980s as registered organisations with access to donor funding that could cover the costs of production.

These posters were politically powerful and visually stunning. They were framed and hung on the walls of our offices and homes - often the only embellishments in the spaces where our campaign meetings were organised. Our campaigns against violence widened beyond dowry murders to sex selective abortions; injectable contraceptives and implants forced on women by government health programmes; mass-scale clinical trials turning rural poor women into unwitting guinea pigs for big pharma; forced sterilisations ... all these were taken up in women’s campaigns. Each of these campaigns generated reams of analysis, writing, posters and films. But the focus was still on producing materials and widening the base of the campaigns, with little thought of archiving anything.



Songs and poetry have traditionally been a mode of self-expression and communication in rural India. Women's movements in India too have drawn on this rich creative tradition and have been prolific in their use of folk music and theatre in their campaigns.

Kamla Bhasin repurposed Bollywood hits to disseminate feminist perspectives on everything from women's right to property to the nuclear arms race. Since the tunes were familiar to most people, everyone could sing along, raising the roof with feminist elan. Audio cassettes of these songs travelled widely across the country, and continue to be sung at our meetings and gatherings today.

Fortunately, many participants in the movements of those early years were hoarders by temperament, meticulously collecting and preserving the ephemera from movement campaigns and protests. Women's organisations like Aalochana in Pune, Vacha in Mumbai, Jagori in Delhi, and collectives like Saheli in Delhi emerged as repositories of movement histories: everything from handwritten drafts of handbills, pamphlets and statements, posters and placards, minutes of campaign meetings, reports and press releases, letters, newspaper cuttings, photographs and more.

Feminists who straddled movement and academic spaces, many of whom had built up their own personal collections of movement materials, catalysed the shift from "archives as collections" to "archives as sites where power and knowledge converge". Feminists have turned a critical lens on archiving practices, contesting erasures, exclusions and silences to create new knowledges and alternative readings of the past and present.

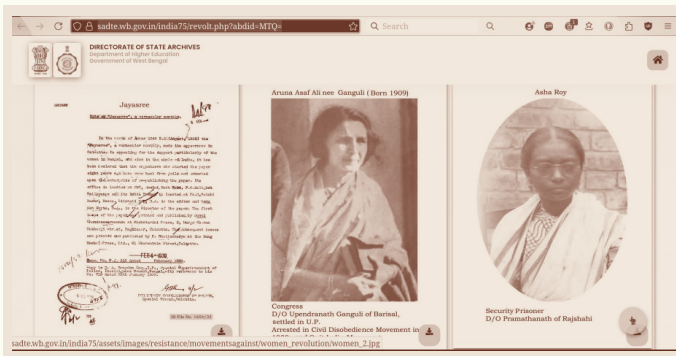
Countering the exclusion of women's voices from history was the initial spark for feminist archiving in India. SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) founded in 1988 by feminist writer Ambai (CS Lakshmi) holds oral histories, personal papers, recorded speeches,

photographs, posters, films, writings and cultural creations of women who have been agents of change in different fields. Sonal Shukla's film *Bhitar Bahe Muktidhara* ("The Stream Within") records the stories of Gujarati women who were active in the freedom movement but who remain invisible in official records.

The Indian Association of Women's Studies celebrated its 20th year with a compilation of interviews of activists from the early years. Another series of video interviews with Indian feminists became a part of the Global Feminisms Project. "Poster Women", the Zubaan archive of posters created by movements against violence destabilises the stereotype of women's movements as metro-centric and by showcasing the creative imageries and languages of resistance of movements across the country. The Zubaan archive also includes audio interviews with feminist pioneers, and reflections on their journeys by feminist activists, as well as video interviews with artistes, writers and activists from the North Eastern Region. The SNDT Women's University in Mumbai hosts the Avabai Wadia archive that commemorates the lives of women who ask "uncomfortable questions about the established social order." This archive is now being expanded and digitised.

"March 8 would also be a big event. Practice would go on and it was time to make new placards and banners. ...Before the computerized printed placards made their appearance, each placard was an act of art whether done by the "A" team or the "B" team (the latter couldn't draw for nuts). Then there were menials who could only buy and glue things (which would include me)."

○ Kalpana Mehta remembers from the Zubaan archive



As newer digital technologies became cheaper and more user-friendly, movement records and documents moved from the overflowing steel trunks and stuffed filing cabinets of women's organisations, to more expansive digital spaces . The Feminist Law Archives, an ongoing initiative of PLD (Partners in Law and Development), contains unpublished documents and advocacy materials on women's movements and their engagement with the law on various themes, many of them contributed by women's organisations. PLD also hosts "Ways of Seeing and Being", a curated series of video interviews with feminist filmmakers, artists, photographers, writers and researchers to highlight how their lives and work have been shaped by their feminism. Jagori's Living Feminisms archive includes books, journals, songs, posters, poems, photographs, conference papers, leaflets, women's memoirs. Biographies of pioneering Indian feminists and interviews with young feminists are also being archived on the Feminism In India website. A number of archives, museums and organisations have contributed images to a collection entitled "Women in India: Unheard Stories" on the Google Arts and Culture platform.

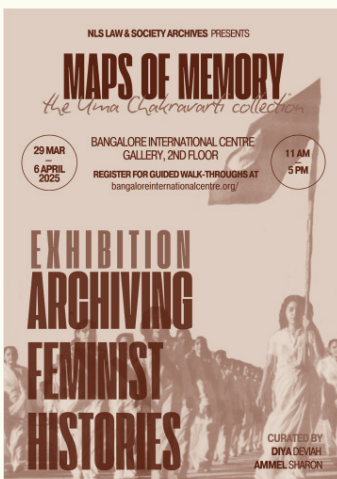
The 1947 Partition Archive contains the images, voices and memories of women who lived through this period of blood, violence and dispossession. The Hamaara Itihas archive is a curated collection of oral testimonies, photographs, documents, audio clips and a film on women freedom fighters. The State Archives of West Bengal has a collection of photographs and prison records of more than 800 women who were arrested and jailed during the struggle for Independence, unearthed from the records of the Intelligence Bureau.

The Maps of Memory exhibition displays archival fragments and glimpses of personal memory to reconstruct joyful utopian worlds that feminists began building across South Asia in the mid-20th century. Featuring Dr. Uma Chakravarti's collection from the National Law School Archives, the exhibition offers a visual, cinematic, and scholarly journey through people's movements in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Through posters, films, and groundbreaking historical research, it invites visitors to engage with the intertwined narratives of friendships and struggles for democratic rights across South Asia.

Feminist filmmakers have made powerful contributions to the visual history of women's movements. This rich collective body of work includes meticulous documentation of iconic movements ; investigations of state policies and their impacts on women's bodies and lives, poignant records of unseen lives and unheard voices, biographies of women whose lives are inseparable from their politics, and histories of "political women" and the price they paid for standing up to the state. These films have found an audience beyond feminist circles and have sparked critical conversations in unexpected spaces.

Women's diaries, scrapbooks, photographs and other ephemera of daily life and domestic spaces have long been rich source material for researchers, but recognition of "ordinary women" as archivists in their own right has been slow in coming. For instance, family photographs and photo albums, very often handed down from mothers to daughters and daughters-in-law, are visual micro-histories. The film "Family Album" explores the ways in which women's curation of family photographs creates opportunities for them to narrativise their personal and social identities as memory makers.

Alongside continuing tensions around caste, class, religion and sexuality in feminist renderings of movement histories, Dalit, queer and other non-dominant groups are creating their own digital spaces. Websites like Round Table India and Savari are spaces where Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi women are in conversation with each other, building an Ambedkarite feminist politics. The International Dalit Solidarity Network contains an archive of international reports and ground-level information on rights of Dalit women. Feminism In India is a platform for "intersectional feminism – desi style", with the aim of building a feminist consciousness among young people. QAMRA (Queer Archive for Memory Reflection and Activism) is a multimedia archival project at the National Law School of India



University that collects and preserves the personal stories, histories, and memories of queer and trans individuals and communities in India.

For the last several years, Dalit archivists have been building grassroots archives of Dalit lives and politics. [Yashashwani Srinivas](#) is collecting and digitising copies of *Panchama*, a Dalit movement magazine called printed in the 1970s and 1980s. [Vijay Surwade](#), a bank manager by profession, has put together an Ambedkar archive containing documents, private correspondence and hundreds of original photographs and personal possessions of Babasaheb Ambedkar, stored in cardboard boxes in his Kalyan apartment.

New and creative approaches are expanding the space for re-framing history and culture through the lens of feminist politics. Feminist singers and musicians are [“singing the archive”](#), collecting and performing [protest songs](#) and [compositions by women bhakti poets](#). Websites like [feminisminindia](#) (“intersectional feminism, desi style”) and [The Third Eye](#) (“putting the Feminist in Learning”) are spaces where young feminists are discussing everything from films, AI and dating apps to communal violence, transphobia and capitalism with a distinctly here-and-now edge.

The [Archives Of Dreaming](#) project explores the role of young women in anti-colonial thinking through their writing in college magazines and periodicals, “almost the only place where they enter colonial history as speaking subjects”. The project is hosted on the [Archive Stories](#) website, an open-access space for conversations about the idea of archiving as a creative practice. The initiative rejects the notion of a complete archive, instead seeing archiving as an incomplete and always-expanding practice.

Even as we bemoaned the lockdown years, online platforms expanded the possibilities of communication in unanticipated ways. Feminist meetings moved into virtual space, as did academic discussions and seminars, expanding our access far beyond the boundaries of physical spaces. Initiatives like *Yuva Samvad*, an online youth forum hosted by the National Alliance of People’s Movements, organised webinars with young activists from diverse social locations for dialogues around their work and struggles and Constitutional values.

Many of the big online meetings of women’s movements during the pandemic years were memorials for the feminist stalwarts who left us without saying goodbye. The feisty women whose lives we celebrated in these meetings would have laughed at the idea of a farewell party in virtual space.

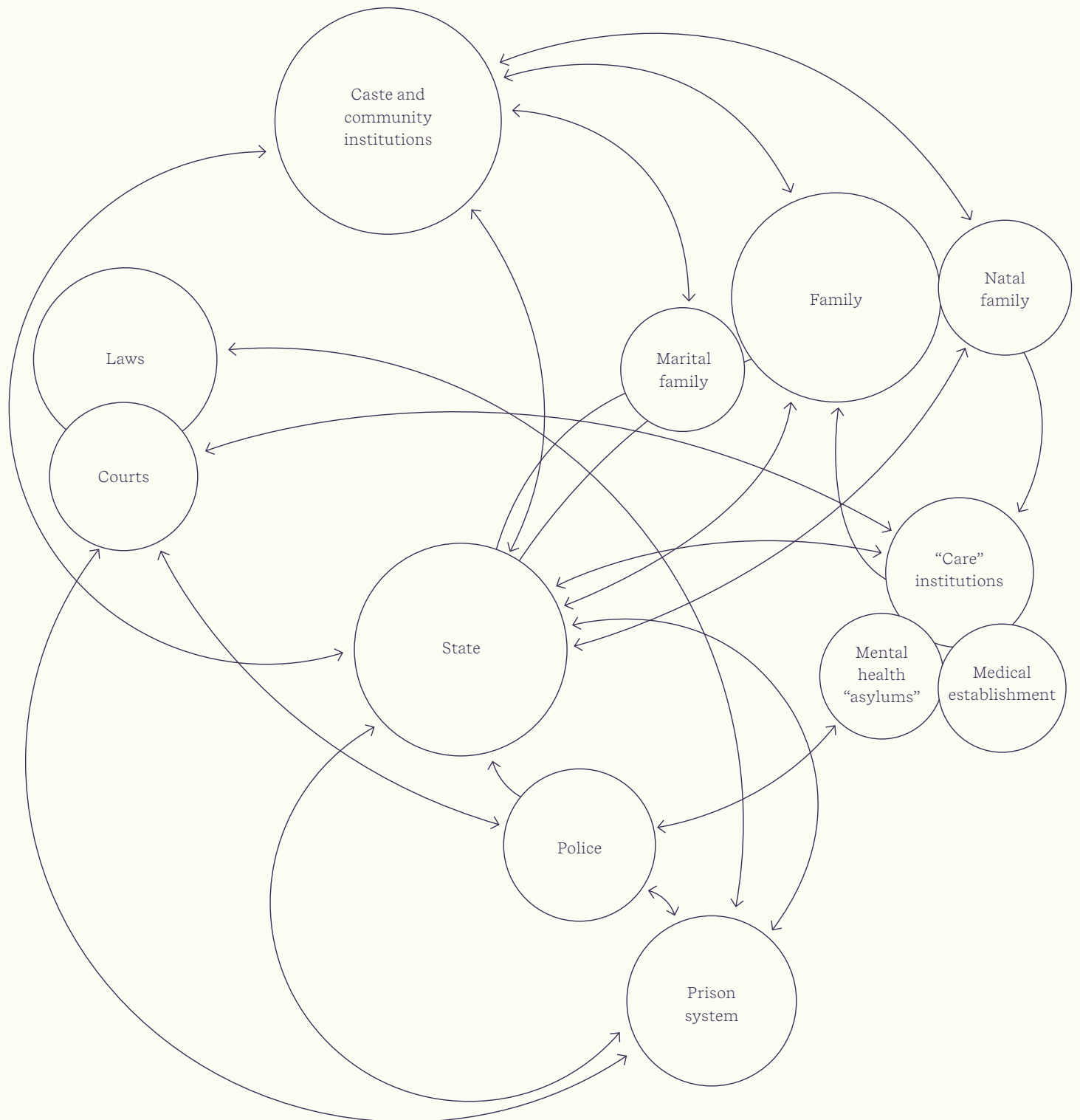
It was during the lockdown that we began our project of inviting feminist friends and comrades to share their personal journeys with us. Even though we were thousands of miles apart, these intense conversations, rich with emotions, memories, stories and reflections, blew away our lockdown blues and launched us on yet another feminist archiving expedition.

The stories, narratives and reflections that we have collected in the course of this project are no more than vignettes of our collective history. Nevertheless, these materials hold the possibility of growing into a collectively-owned and ongoing work-in-progress: an archive that can expand to accommodate the twists, turns and great leaps forward of our movements now and in the future.




Perpetual custody

The stories and materials we have collated and curated in this document are only a small slice of a rich and layered history of Indian women's movements over the last 50 years. In these years of mobilisation and resistance, women's movements have put together a picture of the system that creates, sustains and justifies violence against women, girls and queer people.



The picture is like a jigsaw that is never complete – new pieces are constantly added, bringing new layers and dimensions to the analysis.



● The graphic on the previous page is a representation of this system – a system created by the alliance between multiple hierarchies of power and privilege the survival of which depends on the subordination of women and the oppressed castes. This system is often referred to as brahminical patriarchy, a term coined by Uma Chakravarti to explain the connections between caste, patriarchy, economic power and state power, all of which operate through endogamy and control of women's sexuality, legitimised and enforced by the state.

The notion of brahminical patriarchy has been further complicated by queer feminists and their allies who have argued that along with caste endogamy and control of women's sexuality, compulsory heterosexuality is essential for the perpetuation of the family, caste hierarchies, property relations and economic hierarchies, and the state. It would be more accurate therefore to refer to this system as **brahminical heteropatriarchy**.

The graphic is a simplified depiction of the network of social institutions that are involved in controlling and policing of sexuality, caste endogamy and gender identity. These social institutions are legitimised, protected and supported by the state and its institutions. The heterosexual patriarchal family is at the heart of this system, in which control (disguised as "love", "care" and "protection") is brought to bear on women, girls and queer people to keep them in their proper place: docile and unquestioning **subjects of custody**.

Legitimacy for the notion of women as perpetual subjects of custody and control is sought in religious

texts such as the Hindu Manusmriti. According to this text, a woman is to be kept under male custody at all times, to be passed like a parcel from her father to her husband to her son, each of whom are responsible for governing, controlling and if necessary, chastising her at successive stages of her life.

Like other systems of oppression, brahmanical heteropatriarchy flows smoothly beneath the surface of daily life and is easy to deny and deride. Control and custody are framed as love, care and protection. Their power becomes visible only when they are challenged or resisted by "unruly women" - women who marry outside their caste; women and girls who resist or try to leave a marriage; women with mental illness or intellectual disabilities; women who are "rescued" from illegal or "immoral" situations; or simply women who threaten the established order by their refusal to conform, their rejection of prescribed norms and rules, their insistence on asserting their rights, or their habit of confronting and challenging power-holders inside and outside their families.

● The family as custodian: control as the price of protection

The accountability for enforcing this custodial regime lies primarily with the family, but also with community institutions (such as religious bodies and caste councils) who are seen as guardians of community morals and “honour”.

Girls and women who flout the rules and “tarnish the honour” of the family, clan or community in any way – from using a cellphone or wearing jeans, to getting into relationships with boys from a different caste or a different religion – can be humiliated, beaten or killed by any member of the family with almost complete impunity. Families who fail in their custodial duties are subjected to censure, ostracism or outright violence, while the offending woman is dealt with (often with extreme brutality) by these custodians of community morality.

The legal framework reinforces the notion of women as fitting subjects of custody. Indian women across religious groups are infantilised and subordinated to their male custodians by family laws. Even when no specific laws exist, there is no dearth of people who jump in to enforce the prescribed “Indian values” and preserve “our ancient culture”. Everyone – from schoolteachers to doctors to shopkeepers, petty bureaucrats, landlords, neighbours and colleagues – feels entitled to reinforce the message that women cannot be left to their own devices. Even transitory spaces like women's hostels claim custodial rights, and personal choices such as not changing one's name after marriage become fraught affairs.

A study conducted by The Hindu in 2013 analysed all the sexual assault cases (600) that were heard in the district court in Delhi for a period of six months.

They discovered that out of the 460 cases that were argued in court, 189 involved consenting couples. In 174 out of the 189 cases, the complaints were filed by the parents of the girl. In 107 cases, the woman who filed the ‘complaint’ deposed that they had eloped with their partner and had married them. Some even had children. The girls have also deposed that they faced abuse at the hands of their parents — ranging from being threatened to being beaten up and even being forced to undergo medical examination and abortions. The study further noted that a majority of the cases involved inter-caste or inter-religious couples. Since parents, mostly of the girl, do not agree to the relationship, they file a complaint against the boy who is usually not older than 18 or recently became a major, in a bid to separate the couple and gain custody of the girl.

More often than not, the police and judiciary are active allies of families in enforcing the moral order. For instance, in many cases where a daughter of the family elopes with a man of her choice, the parents will go to the police and file a case of kidnapping against the man and his family. This becomes the excuse for police to harass the man's family and coerce them into handing over the couple or pay a hefty bribe to get the case withdrawn.

The Supreme Court has acknowledged the misogyny of Indian courts. Several judgements include advice to parents on exercising "proper control" of their daughters.

In cases where the daughter is a minor, the draconian provisions of POCSO (the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012) are weaponised by families to justify criminal proceedings against the man, even when the relationship is clearly consensual. By increasing the age of consent from 16 to 18, POCSO criminalises adolescent sexuality and allows parents to demand custody of daughters and punishment for their supposed "kidnappers". Even if courts quash most of these contrived cases, it is only in very rare instances that they follow through by ordering action against parents and families for perjury and misusing the law.

In such a situation, the occasional bracing reminder from the courts that young women are autonomous individuals and do not need parental control or "protection", is cause for optimism. The Kerala High Court has made some scathing observations against college authorities for seeking to curtail the right to freedom of movement of women students, ostensibly at the request of their parents. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has urged rethinking on the age of consent and criminalisation of adolescent sexuality.

Queer people pose an even more dangerous threat to the heteropatriarchal order than unruly women: their very existence are living proof that heterosexuality and gender binaries are neither universal or normal. Not surprisingly then, the life experiences of queer and trans people hold up a mirror to the heteropatriarchal family in all its brutality.

Speaking at a recent public hearing, queer and transpersons shared chilling stories of abuse. Any evidence of "deviant" behaviour is met with physical and emotional violence. Children as young as 14 are forced into marriage and face domestic violence, rape and forced pregnancy, often with explicit or tacit approval of their natal families. Attempts to escape are thwarted by families, with parents and in-laws colluding to bring them back to their "homes" where they are confined and treated as prisoners and physically violated. Several people spoke of being sent to so-called "rehab" centres or psychiatric facilities where they were placed under physical restraint and heavy sedation, and subjected to "conversion therapies" in contravention of professional ethics. Queer women have faced threats of "corrective" rape as well as actual rape by family members, including fathers and brothers.

For those who fight to survive these violations without any access to peer groups and support networks, the most horrific aspect of their situation is that even if they escape their families, they have no one to turn to. Every individual and institution they approach – relatives, neighbours, landlords, employers, police, doctors, courts – is hostile to "deviance" and colludes with their families to punish and/or "cure" them.

● The state as custodian: the myth of “care”

Apart from providing benign oversight to the legal and institutional arrangements that allow families and communities to keep women in custody, the state is also a custodian in its own right for people who have fallen foul of the law or are deemed to pose a threat to society.

It is noteworthy that among the institutions created to deal with these “problem” individuals, there are several that are intended specifically to cater to women who deviate from their socially assigned roles as dutiful daughters, wives and mothers. These include homes for girls and women who have run away from their families or been abandoned by them, wives who have been thrown out by their husbands or in-laws, women who have been “rescued” from sex work, minor girls who have been trafficked or sexually abused, mental health institutions and institutions for children with disabilities.

According to the doctors and the wardens at Kilpauk mental hospital, many women had been admitted for their “defiance”.

“If you deviate from what is expected of you due to your gender, you might experience violence. If you experience violence, you might experience impacted mental health. This is rooted in patriarchy and structural issues,” Saisha Manan from the Mariwala Health Initiative explains. The experience of violence, especially gender-based violence, cannot be separated from mental health issues.

Inside India’s mental health institutions, women lose autonomy and agency ([The Swaddle 2021](#))

Studies show that thousands of women have been committed to mental health institutions primarily or only because their families wanted to get rid of them. According to a recent study more than half of long-stay patients in mental health institutions are women, some of whom have been incarcerated for more than 25 years. While some women themselves resist discharge because they have no options other than return to their violent homes, others are trapped by the clinical criteria for determining illness and wellness.

Vidya, a 45-year-old woman was alone at home in Mumbai one night when three people knocked on her door. Posing as government health workers, they ignored her attempts to resist them, sedated her, and took her away. The next morning, she awoke in a private mental hospital, with virtually no contact with her family or friends. She was sedated and medicated against her will, and forced to endure electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). “I was like a vegetable,” she said. “It was only many years later that I found out that I was being given ECT.”

Vidya later discovered that her husband had institutionalized her under the terms of the Mental Health Act without even the need for a court order. Even after she was discharged from the mental hospital, he continued to take her to a local private clinic where she was given ECT under anesthesia without her knowledge or consent.

Vidya claims that her husband wanted to label her as “insane” to be able to get a divorce without paying alimony.

Inside India’s mental health institutions, women lose autonomy and agency ([The Swaddle 2021](#))

Families (and women themselves) recognise that a woman is ill only when she is no longer able to fulfil her ordained tasks of cooking, cleaning, looking after the children and others who need care, looking after animals and running the household. Women who lapse in these duties of care are brought to hospital and left there by their families. Recovery for women is judged by the ability and willingness to take up care work again. More often than not, the stigma of institutionalisation is so strong that families refuse to take back women even if they are officially “cured”.

Legally, adult women cannot be institutionalised or forced to go through any treatment against their will. However, under the terms of the Mental Health Act (2017), women who are certified as mentally ill can be institutionalised at the request of the family. There are hundreds of documented cases where husbands and families have taken advantage of this option to get rid of inconvenient wives, sisters and daughters.

Mental health activists point out that it is very easy to get women certified as mentally ill and committed to institutions without recourse to a legal process. Any behaviour that deviates from docility and obedience is considered “aggression”. Women’s expressions of suffering and grief are often pathologised as “abnormal behaviour”. Women who protest or resist abuse from parents or in-laws are branded violent and dangerous. Women with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities who have been declared as being “of unsound mind” are stripped of their autonomy, and are at the mercy of their legal guardians, whether members of the family or the heads of the institutions to which they are committed, sometimes for life.

There are also many cases where families lack the resources and support needed to care for women with severe disabilities, leaving them with no option but institutionalisation, despite knowing of the dismal condition of these establishments.

Deprived of any voice or agency, women in so-called “care” institutions are helpless in the face of abuse and mistreatment by their custodians. In one particularly gruesome case in 1994, 11 inmates in a government institution for “retarded girls” in Pune were subjected to hysterectomies without consent, on the grounds of “personal hygiene” and “prevention of pregnancy”. Despite protests by women’s groups, the government maintained that the surgeries were necessary for “a life with dignity”. The charge that sexual assault was a commonplace occurrence in this institution was quickly hushed up.

Speaking on the Pune case, a member of the Indian Medical Association, is quoted as saying, “The issue of sterilisation of these children is subsidiary. If society is such that these children cannot be protected from sexual abuse, then hysterectomy will be too inadequate. These severely retarded girls need permanent closure of their vaginas. We are too timid to talk of this.”

A recent report documents practices in institutions for women with intellectual disabilities that amount to custodial violence and abuse in the guise of treatment. Force-feeding of medications is routine. Women who soil their clothes are kept naked in bare cells.

Electroconvulsive therapy (which the UN Rapporteur on Torture has denounced as a form of torture) is routinely used not just as a treatment for violent and suicidal patients, but also to threaten and subdue “unmanageable” patients. Staff are quite open about these practices, signalling the extent to which they are normalised.

“When the female criminal or prisoner is written about, she is presented as extraordinary, grotesque and demonic, one who has not only broken the legal frame but has also transgressed several normative and moral boundaries of social life. The figure of the female deviant brings dishonour to the family and the wider community. Honour, then, is the crucial context within which female deviance is perceived, not just by the institutions of the family and community but also by the criminal justice system.”

○ Bandyopadhyay, M., & Mehta, R. (2022). Introduction : Carceral logics, gender justice, and resistance.

● The state as jailer: the power to punish

As the previous section makes clear, the line between being in a care institution and being in a prison is a very thin and porous one. Both are sites where the state steps in and relieves families and communities of the burden of dealing with troublesome women.

In the eyes of the state, mentally ill women and women law-breakers fall into the same category: transgressive women who refuse to fit into their prescribed roles and adhere to the rules and codes of behaviour prescribed for them by virtue of their sex and their location in the social order.

The simultaneous pathologising and criminalising of protest and rebellion by women was furthered by the work of early criminologists (most of them men), who either held that criminality was an essential element of the female psyche, or emphasised the “perversion” of women who rebelled against their natural feminine roles.

Both these schools of thought contributed to building a social consensus: unruly women whose families and communities fail to contain and control them must perforce be taken into punitive custody, to be incarcerated, isolated, disciplined and punished by the overwhelming power of the state. Writings by women prisoners from colonial times to more recent accounts stand testimony to the remarkable durability of this custodial consensus.

Narratives of women prisoners mirror those of women incarcerated in care institutions: the same stories of isolation and abandonment by families, normalisation of abuse, loss of agency, brutal and degrading practices designed to break down any lingering sense of agency, autonomy and self-respect.

According to the latest (2021) data from the National Crime Records Bureau, there are 22,900 women and 91 transgender persons held in jails around the country, of whom 1650 have been incarcerated with their children. Only a minority of prisoners in Indian jails are serving out a sentence – the vast majority are “undertrials” who have not been convicted of, and sometimes not even charged with, any crime. Although the NCRB report does not provide data disaggregated by gender, caste or religion, there is enough evidence to show that the majority of women prisoners also fall in the “undertrial” category, with the majority being Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims from poor families – women who live at the confluence of multiple hierarchies of oppression and disprivilege. These are women whose lives are a continuum of violence and abuse, whether inside or outside the prison walls.

Prison life for women from oppressed castes and communities is marked by the same strategies of humiliation and othering deployed against them on the outside: invisibility, spatial and occupational segregation, moral policing, exclusion and isolation, all enforced through targeted physical and sexual violence by the authorities as well as by fellow-prisoners belonging to privileged groups.

The experiences of Dalit prisoners, women from the so-called “criminal tribes” and transgender persons testify to the multiple ways in which caste and gender identities become the basis for a custodial regime of enhanced brutality, designed to reinforce the notion of intrinsic criminality and justify abuse of authority in the name of keeping “these people” in their proper place.

Conversations with feminist activists who have themselves been imprisoned emphasise that inside the walled world of the prison, the authorities hold absolute power over life and death. Even though the Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed the human rights of prisoners and undertrials, these pronouncements have no traction “inside”. In the world of the prison, custodians hold absolute power. Human rights, laws and court orders are all flouted with complete impunity. Women undertrials are systematically blocked from access to legal aid, isolated from social support, and denied basic necessities such as medicines, undergarments and sanitary napkins. As always, the poorest are the worst affected.

Turning a feminist lens on the embodied experience of imprisonment reveals the the ideological underpinnings of “carceral logic” – the recognition that transgressive women have the inherent power to shake the foundations of caste and patriarchy, and must therefore be removed from

society and isolated until they are reformed and reborn as “docile bodies”. The more public these transgressions, the more brutal the terms of custody and the higher the bar for release.

The imperative for the state to take over custodial control of women has acquired a sharper political edge in the last three decades. These years have been defined by the political consensus around neoliberal economics, the legitimisation of majoritarian agendas, and the melding of religious and political goals to further the reimagination of India as a Hindu state. At the same time, the arena of women’s rebellion and resistance has seen a steady expansion outwards, from challenging the power of the family and community, to challenging the state itself at the national level. The sweeping arrests and incarceration of young feminist activists - transgressive women by definition – marks their location at the centre of our shrinking democratic space.

“Let us re-examine the whole question, all the questions. Let us take nothing for granted. Let us not only redefine ourselves, our role, our image - but also the kind of society we want to live in.”

A few years ago, a photograph of the Twitter founder holding a poster with the slogan “Smash Brahminical Patriarchy” created a furore on social media and online forums.

Left-liberal feminists were attacked and accused of cooking up the concept solely to humiliate brahmins and denigrate India. The usual arguments in defence of the caste system were trotted out. A case of “outraging religious sentiments” (a uniquely Indian offence) filed by one of the objectors was summarily dismissed by the Rajasthan High Court but failed to stem the fury.

Ironically, the attempt to silence and cancel the slogan served to open up a much wider discussion on a concept that until then, was not much known or discussed outside feminist circles.



This cautionary tale from the state of Kerala – marketed to tourists as God's Own Country and boasting the highest score on the national Human Development Index – is proof of the continuing hold of brahminical patriarchy, even in a supposedly progressive part of the country.

In October 2018, the Supreme Court of India overturned a centuries-old custom that debarred women of menstruating age from entering the Sabarimala temple in Kerala. The Leftist government of Kerala hailed the verdict as a step forward for gender equality, and assured police protection for women who wanted to visit the shrine.

Hindu right-wing groups were outraged at this flouting of upper-caste norms of purity and exhorted believers to resist this “attack on Hindus”. Militant Hindu organisations mobilised their members to come out on the streets, armed and ready to resist the “insult to Hindu religious sentiments”. The protests quickly turned violent. Three people were killed and hundreds (including women, journalists and police) were injured. Shops and schools were closed. Crude bombs were thrown at the offices of the ruling party. Close to 3000 people were arrested.

The state government held its ground on the issue. On New Year's Day 2019, women from Left parties and progressive groups organised a historic protest. Nearly 300,000 women stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a 620-km human chain extending the length of the state. With their right hands outstretched, the women recited a pledge: “We have gathered here to support the constitutional perspective of gender equality we will stop any attempt to turn Kerala into a madhouse.” Counter-protests organised by Hindu organisations mobilised middle class women from privileged castes to “defend the Hindu faith”

In the wake of the verdict, nearly 700 women registered their intent to visit Sabarimala. Twelve women tried, but had to turn back in the face of attacks from mobs of men who heckled them, blocked the path, pelted them with stones, attacked the police, and set vehicles on fire.

In the midst of this political turmoil, on the morning of January 2, 2019, Bindhu Ammini, a lawyer and Dalit activist. and her friend Kanakadurga, both dressed in long black garments and escorted by 50 policemen, entered the Sabarimala temple. Pandemonium ensued. Within hours, the temple was shut down in order to conduct elaborate brahminical purification rituals prescribed when sacred spaces are contaminated by blood, excreta or the presence of Dalits.

Though the Kerala government had announced protection from attacks by right-wing groups, the women were left to fend for themselves. In the months that followed, Bindhu was physically assaulted, sprayed with pepper spray, run over by an auto, and subjected to relentless online abuse. In most cases, her police escort stood by and watched. Finally, she was forced to leave the state and move to Delhi where she is now a practising lawyer.

Born in a Dalit family and brought up by a single mother, Bindhu has experienced violence and discrimination throughout her life. In one instance, her neighbours forced their way into the house and beat up her mother. The attackers went scot-free, but Bindhu was arrested when she fought back. Active in student movements, she joined the CPI-ML and in 2009 became the state secretary of the party, the first woman to hold the post. Despite this, she was not safe from attacks, harassment and threats. Disillusioned with Left politics, she stepped back in 2011 to focus on her career in law.

Leaving Kerala and establishing herself as a lawyer in Delhi has not deterred Bindhu's attackers. The internet warriors of the Hindu right-wing have now circulating sleaze videos with morphed images on social media. The Delhi police are apathetic in the face of her repeated complaints.

Meanwhile, in a shameful betrayal of their stated commitment to gender equality, the Kerala government is organising a global festival in honour of the Sabarimala deity. Bindhu has not been invited. Minister VN Vasavan has said that Bindhu “won’t be allowed to take part in the Sangamam at any cost.” because the event is for “real devotees”.

Bindhu’s friend, journalist KK Shahina, feels that society’s violent response to Bindhu is very telling of the prejudices it holds against women who challenge norms. “Part of this hostility also stems from Bindhu’s caste location ... she does not fit the mould of a so-called sophisticated, elite intellectual. If she were someone like that, perhaps her views may have been given more space and acceptance.”

Anger, for Bindhu, is not something to be hidden or tamed — it is the force that shapes and anchors her. “It’s not that I don’t feel sadness or other emotions,” she explained. “But anger must be shown as anger.”

○ Based on a report by Nidhi Suresh and Sukanya Shaji (2025) for The News Minute

“Bindu is a Dalit who has dared to transgress the limits set by the Brahmanical patriarchy. What disturbs her male detractors is that she remains undeterred from asserting herself, in spite of their judgement. She had the sharpness and wit to respond on air to their allegations of crudity in language with “It isn’t the quality of language you use, but your conduct that matters”.

○ Prabhir Vishnu Porithiyil (2019)
The Spectre Haunting Hindutva: An assertive Dalit woman

Laws on Rape: The Legal Journey

Women's movements usually identify the Mathura case as the spark that ignited a movement against rape that still burns bright, more than 50 years later.



● Mathura, a 16 year old orphan adivasi girl, lived with her brother in the Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra. She occasionally worked as a domestic helper and became intimate with her employer's nephew Ashok, who wanted to marry her.

Her brother opposed the relationship and went to the local police station to lodge a complaint claiming that his sister, a minor, had been kidnapped by Ashok. Ashok and his family were brought to the police station the same day. Everyone was allowed to leave after their statements were recorded, but Mathura was asked to stay behind. While her relatives waited outside, she was taken into the lavatory and raped by two policemen. Mathura managed to come out and immediately told everyone what had happened. It was only when a crowd surrounded the police station and threatened to burn it down that a complaint was filed and a case was initiated.

The case had a long and tortuous journey through the legal system. It came up in the sessions court in June 1974, more than two years after the rape. The judge found the defendants not guilty on the grounds that Mathura was 'habituated to sexual intercourse' and her consent was, therefore, voluntary.

The case went on appeal to the High Court, which set aside the judgment of the Sessions Court and sentenced the accused to one and five years imprisonment respectively. The bench held that passive submission due to fear induced by serious threats could not be construed as consent or 'willing sexual intercourse'.

However, in September 1979, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court reversed the High Court ruling and once again acquitted the accused policemen. The judges noted that Mathura had

not raised an alarm, there were no visible marks of injury on her body suggesting that there was no struggle, and therefore no rape. The judgement concluded that, 'Because she was used to sex, she might have incited the policemen (who were drunk on duty) to have intercourse with her'.

"Your Lordship, does the Indian Supreme Court expect a young girl 14-16 years old, when trapped by two policemen inside the police station, to successfully raise alarm for help? Does it seriously expect the girl, a labourer, to put up such stiff resistance against well-built policemen so as to have substantial marks of physical injury? Does the absence of such marks necessarily imply absence of stiff resistance? If anything it is Ganpat's body which would have disclosed marks of such resistance by Mathura, like clawing and biting."

○ From the Open Letter to the CJI

In September 1979, only a few days after the verdict was pronounced, four law professors - Upendra Baxi, Raghunath Kelkar and Lotika Sarkar of Delhi University and Vasudha Dhagamwar of Pune - wrote an open letter to the Chief Justice of India, with a scorching critique of the judgement and the biases and values that it reflected. Anticipating that Indian newspapers would be unwilling to invite charges of contempt of court, the authors sent it off to a Pakistani newspaper, The Dawn, where it was published and widely circulated.

“There is no justification for differentiating between a rape by a policeman in a police station and a rape by a policeman somewhere else.”

○ Prof Lotika Sarkar

The open letter is an iconic document, a watershed in the history of women's movements and their engagements with the law. The legal critiques, broad-based movements and political debates that it sparked led to a reframing of the jurisprudence on rape.

The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1983 was the first amendment in rape laws since the promulgation of the Indian Penal Code in 1860. Custodial rape was recognised as an aggravated offence. The issue of consent would be settled based on the woman's statement which would be accepted without question. Provision for in camera trials and prohibitions against disclosing the identity of the victim were brought in. The amended law recognised that the power imbalance implicit in custodial contexts would aggravate structural inequalities.

There was no unanimity among the four signatories on the specific remedy to be sought. Professor Kelkar wanted to ask for a review and reversal of the judgement. It was only after much debate that he agreed that the letter could not be used to punish the accused once they had been acquitted.

As a prominent feminist herself, Lotika Sarkar had to face questions from activists on seeking a reversal of the burden of proof only in cases of custodial rape and not all rapes. Her stand was clear – such a step would put too much power in the hands of the state, which could then use this provision to plant false cases against those who call it to account for abuse of power.

The open letter reflects a feminist politics built around a common commitment to ethical practice and grounded in personal and professional relationships of respect and trust. The debates and disagreements around the contents of the letter and the subsequent proposals for amendments of rape laws highlight the complexity of the conceptual and legal issues involved, many of which we continue to grapple with to this day.

The open letter sparked a spontaneous wave of protests and demonstrations by women's groups. In Mumbai, forty women formed the Forum Against Rape and organised a public meeting to protest the Supreme Court judgement. This group was later renamed as the Forum against Oppression of Women (FAOW), with the four authors of the open letter among the founding members. International Women's Day became a platform for women's groups, who came out on the streets in Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad and other cities to demand reform of the rape laws. The debate on legal reforms began in earnest at a national meeting in 1980 – the first national conference of women - organised by FAOW and attended by women from all over the country.



● Forgotten histories

Most of the available accounts of the Mathura case identify the meetings and demonstrations by women's groups in Bombay and Delhi as the starting point of the movement.

In fact, the first protest against the Mathura judgement was organised by Dr Seema Sakhare of the Stree Atyachar Virodhi Parishad of Nagpur, among the earliest women's organisations working on violence against women.

When Dr Sakhare first heard of the case, she went to meet Mathura and began writing about her case in a Marathi newspaper (Lokmat). She filed a petition in the High Court against the verdict of the trial court.

Speaking to a reporter recently, Dr Sakhare, now 88 years old, recalls the hostility she faced from the Brahmin lobby when the High Court found the policemen guilty. "That a social activist from a disadvantaged caste group (Teli) managed to get a verdict in the victim's favour upset the upper caste lobby" she says.

● The social and political context in which the Mathura case played out must be taken into account in assessing its impacts on rape law.

These were the post-Emergency years, when the resurgence of left-democratic movements and groups and struggles against class oppression turned the spotlight on the state and its institutions. The police and the police station were identified as symbols and sites of state power by civil liberties groups. Even as women activists spoke out about their prison experiences, women were creating their own groups outside the confines of leftist movements and their male hierarchies.

Police brutality was a central concern for these emerging women's groups, many of whom were supporting working-class, Dalit and minority women engaged in land struggles, movements against displacement and eviction, wage struggles and anti-caste struggles. Activism around these issues and other cases of custodial rape contributed to building a feminist discourse on rape as a manifestation of intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchal power and control.

Apart from the Mathura rape case, feminists identify two other “critical events” that fueled the mobilisations of the late 70s and early 80s, that illuminate the dynamics of vulnerability for women who live in the shadow of multiple oppressive hierarchies.

Rameeza Bee was a working-class Muslim woman in Hyderabad. In April 1978, she and her husband were returning from a late-night visit to the cinema

when they were arrested by the police for loitering. The police demanded a fine. The husband went home to bring the money. During his absence, Rameeza Bee was raped by three policemen. When the husband returned and protested, he was beaten to death by the police. Rameeza Bee was prosecuted for enticing minor girls into prostitution. She was convicted on this charge. The incident triggered widespread violence in the old city, and a curfew and shoot-at-sight orders were issued. Several people were killed in police firing. Finally, an enquiry was announced, to be conducted by Justice KA Muktadar. Vasanth Kannabiran, a feminist who attended the hearings, recalls that the judge was shocked at this first encounter with the “ugly truth” of the lives of poor Muslims. The police had a simple defence: Rameeza was a prostitute and her husband was a pimp, so there was no case. Many well-to-do Muslims were shaken by the case, but the manner in which they expressed their support gave away their assumptions and biases. One such “patron” gave her his wife’s jewellery and a lace burqa so that she could look “decent”. That her husband had just been killed and she was grieving was no one’s concern. Some other groups were reluctant to support Rameeza because she had been labelled a “prostitute”. Justice Muktadar’s report was a powerful indictment of the way that the case had been handled, singling out the forensic examiner and public prosecutor for their criminal lapses, and recommending immediate suspension and prosecution of all the accused policemen whom he found “guilty beyond doubt”. The case was reopened but transferred to the neighbouring state “so as to give the policemen a fair hearing.”

The sessions court in Raichur duly acquitted all the accused, commenting that “the polluted evidence of Rameeza Bee merits no concern”.

Maya Tyagi was a middle-class housewife. In July 1980, she was driving with her husband to her parents’ home in Haryana. The car broke down on the way, and while it was being repaired a policeman in civilian dress tried to molest Maya. He was beaten up by her husband. The policeman returned with a contingent of policemen. The police opened fire and shot her husband dead. Maya, who was pregnant at the time, was dragged out from her car, beaten, stripped naked and forced to walk to the police station. She was finally taken to the police station, where she was raped by several policemen. She was charged with being a dacoit (armed robber), and subsequently released on bail. Following an outcry from politically powerful groups representing the OBCs (Other Backward Classes), a judicial enquiry was instituted and recommended that all the accused policemen be suspended and prosecuted. Despite recording a detailed description of the violence Maya had been subjected to, the enquiry did not verify the charge of rape. The report of the enquiry reveals an unashamedly sexist, casteist and classist understanding of rape, and obliquely condemns Maya for resisting being removed to the police station even though she was sitting naked on the public street. Nevertheless, the trial court found all the policemen guilty of rape and murder, pronouncing a judgement that has been hailed as “the strongest indictment of the police since independence”.

These three cases fall into the same pattern.

All three women were arrested and taken to the police station without having committed any crime. All three were raped while in this illegal custody. All three belonged to disadvantaged groups. Rameeza as a Muslim woman, and Mathura as a tribal girl were both socially as well as economically disadvantaged. Maya’s family was well-to-do, but belonged to a “backward” agricultural caste. All three women were disbelieved when they said they had been raped. Mathura and Rameeza were subjected to abusive language and public humiliation by the court – Mathura was called a “shameless liar” and Rameeza’s evidence was considered “polluted”. Mathura was accused of seducing the policemen and then crying rape. Both she and Rameeza were labelled sexually promiscuous. Rameeza and Maya were criminalised with false cases filed against them – Rameeza was charged with bringing children into sex work, and Maya was charged with dacoity.

All three of these women are victims of Brahminical patriarchy. The crime for which they were being punished by the institutions of the law was their refusal to fit into the mould of a “good victim” – for speaking out about being raped and for pursuing justice instead of “hiding their shame” as a chaste upper-caste Hindu woman (the model for all good women) is expected to do.

The Mathura case holds deep significance for Indian women’s movements. Many of the older generation of Indian feminists were drawn into activism through the meetings and protests around the case. The mobilisations of that time led to the formation of feminist collectives and women’s organisations; the creation of institutional platforms for dialogue and collaborations between women’s groups, feminist lawyers and academic feminists; strategic alliances with other movements, the deepening of feminist analysis and discourse around intersectionality and the political economy of violence, and the flowering of distinctive and culturally-rooted forms of feminist advocacy and action.

“The participants did everything themselves, from translations to cleaning the toilets. They all slept in one hall. In the mornings, they rolled up their beds and queued for the bathroom. The meetings began at 10am sharp, and those who didn’t manage to bathe joined in their nighties. Sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor with papers and notebooks, they argued, screamed and agreed as they drafted the suggested amendments to the rape laws”

○ Vibhuti Patel, remembering the 1980 meeting on amendments to the rape laws

Many of the unfinished agendas, unresolved questions and unmet demands raised at the time continue to resonate for us today, and are still being raised and pursued by feminist lawyers and women’s movements in courts and public forums.

It is ironic that the Supreme Court judgement in the Mathura case has never been challenged or overruled by a larger bench. It still stands as law and its sexist and casteist rationale continues to be cited by the courts to justify acquittal in other cases of rape.

● And what of Mathura?

Mathura lives with her husband and two sons in a village in Maharashtra. A woman reporter tracked her down in 2013 through a friend – a man who is invisible in movement accounts, but who has stood by her and supported her through her ordeal. Her conversations with this man and with Mathura revealed details of Mathura's story that are completely missing from official accounts.

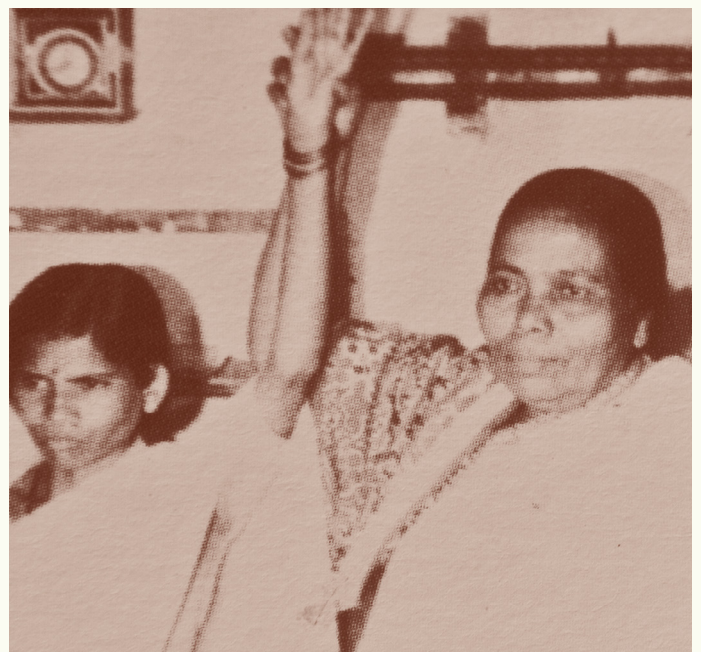
Another reporter who met and spoke to Mathura recently found that Mathura does not know that her case resulted in the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983, that shifted the burden of proof from the victim to the accused. This provision could have changed the outcome of her case, but it has not made any difference to her - her case was never reopened.

"Why have you come to see me?" she asks. "No one has come to see me in all these years. No one came to help me." She is still angry that she

was disbelieved and humiliated by the court.

"Bahut gussa aata hai. Main itni chhoti aur kamzor thi. Usko kaisey maarti? (They should have been punished. I get so angry. I was so small and weak. How could I have resisted them?)"

She acknowledges the need to move on, but there is no one to help her. "My own brother let me down. Who would have helped me? What will I do with all these grudges?"



In the three decades after the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1983, there were three notable instances when sexual violence became a flashpoint for women's movements to mobilise, protest and demand justice.

These mobilisations led to changes in the legal and legislative framework on violence against women. They also left us with uncomfortable questions around our positions on caste violence, our understanding of intersectional oppressions and our practices of solidarity across identities.



● The Bhanwari rape case (1992)

On 22 September 1992, Bhanwari Devi, a saathin (community mobiliser) in the government-funded Women's Development Programme (WDP) was raped by two men in a village in Rajasthan, while three others held her husband down, thrashed him and forced him to watch.

Bhanwari was a 40-year-old woman from the potter (Kumhar) caste, much lower in the caste hierarchy than the rapists and their collaborators, who were all from the same family belonging to the powerful Gujar caste.

The rape was an act of revenge for Bhanwari's calling the police to stop the marriage of a 9-month

old child from a Gujar family. She did this as part of a WDP campaign against child marriage, an unlawful practice that is traditional among several castes and communities in Rajasthan. Bhanwari was simply doing her job but the Gujjars were outraged at the temerity of a woman from a subordinate caste who dared to stand in their way.

The rape was therefore an act of revenge and was intended to dishonour and humiliate her and her husband.

Caste solidarity, bolstered by the social and political clout of the accused men, ensured an actively hostile official response. The local police went beyond the usual lethargy and disinterest to stonewall and humiliate Bhanwari at every step, and made every effort to compromise the case and destroy the evidence. For instance Bhanwari, who knew what she had to do to confirm rape, went straight to a government hospital with her husband without bathing or changing her clothes, was sent from hospital to hospital with doctors refusing to examine her or take a vaginal swab. The swab was finally taken 52 hours after the rape. Bhanwari's clothes were taken away by the police as evidence and she was forced to walk home covered only in her husband's torn and bloodstained chadar (shawl).

Despite repeated appeals from women's groups, the National Commission for Women and the Department of Women stood by and refused to intervene. The case took more than two years to come to trial in the lower court. Throughout this period, the entire machinery of caste and political power was mobilised to threaten and silence Bhanwari and delegitimise her claim to justice.

There were only three families of the potter caste in her village, all of them poor and dependent on the Gujjars for their livelihood. The entire village ganged up against Bhanwari and her husband for having "dishonoured" the village by making the rape public. They were boycotted by the community – no one would buy pots from them. They were prevented from taking water from the village handpump. The local grocery shop refused to sell to them. Senior officials including the district magistrate went on the record to call her a liar. Gujar politicians in Delhi and Rajasthan joined in the chorus of abuse. The Chief Minister, facing an election and aware of the danger of alienating Gujar votes, brushed aside Bhanwari's complaint with the contemptuous comment that "nobody would want to rape this grey-haired woman."

Functionaries of the WDP and Bhanwari's fellow saathins rallied around her in a campaign to expose and counter the nexus between caste power and political power that was behind Bhanwari's persecution. More than 2000 women from across the country joined the saathins and marched with black armbands in a massive rally in Jaipur in solidarity with Bhanwari. The slogans and posters at this rally inverted the patriarchal norm of victim-blaming and victim-shaming by naming and shaming the rapists. Sustained advocacy and pressure by women's groups also resulted in the case being transferred to the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) and the arrest of all five accused.

In November 1995, three years after the rape, the Sessions Court in Jaipur acquitted all five of the accused. The judgement bristled with every imaginable sexist and casteist trope. The judge declared that it was impossible in India for "respectable people" to gang up and collude in a crime, or for a 60 year old man to commit rape in the presence of his nephew. He also asserted the impossibility of an Indian man standing by and watching his wife being raped without doing anything to stop it. According to him "Indian rural society is not so degenerate as to lose all sense of class and caste and pounce on a woman like a wolf."

The acquittal led to widespread outrage and to another nationwide mobilisation of women's groups. An appeal was filed in the High Court. The case is still pending – there has been only one hearing in these 30 years.

Four women's organisations (Vishakha and the Women's Rehabilitation Group from Rajasthan, and Jagori and Kali for Women from Delhi) petitioned the Supreme Court. Their argument was that since Bhanwari was assaulted because of her work in a government programme, the Rajasthan government should have been held responsible for failing to ensure her safety. The petition sought the enforcement of the fundamental rights of working women under Articles 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution. In response, the Supreme Court issued a set of guidelines on ensuring women's

The Visakha judgement was the precursor to the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Protection and Redressal) Act, 2013 (the POSH Act), which was aimed at filling the “legislative lacuna” left by Visakha.

Bhanwari's rape is a classic example of a "power rape" – a punishment for her temerity in challenging both caste and patriarchy, and a warning to others who might show the same tendencies. The collusion between state power and caste power was visible across political parties and at every level of the state machinery which went into overdrive to protect the rapists, deny the rape, delay the investigation, influence the trial and delay the proceedings.

If Bhanwari herself has been left in a judicial limbo with neither justice or closure, the campaign around her cause stands as a landmark in the history of women's mobilisations against violence. Unlike in the Mathura case, this time women's organisations rallied around one of their own. Bhanwari was not just a victim – she was a feminist activist in her own right, a woman committed to equality, a fighter who had taken on the establishment and put her life on the line by refusing to back down from her demand for justice.



The campaign in support of Bhanwari expanded the frame beyond Bhanwari's story, making it a rallying point for all women who were struggling against the intertwined hierarchies of caste and patriarchy. The campaign forged a lasting solidarity between urban women's groups and rural struggles, and enabled alliances between feminists and women workers in government programmes like WDP.

In those days before WhatsApp and Twitter, the groups involved in coordinating the campaign had to work much harder to ensure that everyone who had attended a single rally or signed a single petition was kept informed about progress on the case. Campaign newsletters, many of them handwritten and cyclostyled, were posted to hundreds of supporters. Groups involved in the campaign produced a steady stream of writings, posters, slogans and songs that carried the same sharp messages: the rapist should be ashamed, not the woman; rape is an assertion of power; a system that protects the rapist is itself culpable; justice is possible only if women stand together. Many of these messages made it to the mainstream media and sparked honest conversations in many families and communities.

The gains on the legal front – the recognition of violence in the workplace as a violation of women's rights and the Visakha guidelines – are a lasting legacy of Bhanwari's struggle.

No less important is the impact on the concept and practice of "women's empowerment". It was Bhanwari's colleagues, the community workers and staff of the WDP, who on hearing of the rape,

rushed to her aid and alerted women's organisations in Rajasthan and Delhi to the need for mobilising on the ground. They organised meetings and demonstrations and condemned the way in which the government machinery was colluding with the rapists. In the process, they exposed the disconnect between the government's stated policies and the reality on the ground. They were also outspoken in describing their own exploitation by the government: despite being frontline workers, they were treated as "volunteers", paid a pittance, and treated like expendable commodities by their superiors.

When the Union was formed, project managers of WDP wrote to the husbands of saathins to say that they could not guarantee women's safety while attending union meetings.

The *saathins* successfully registered a union in 1993, in the face of objections from the government. The campaign created opportunities for the WDP women to engage with feminist activists, women's groups and women workers in government programmes from other parts of the country.

These interactions contributed to building a feminist critique of embedded casteism and patriarchy in government programmes for women. They also led programmes like Mahila Samakhya to put in place policies for legal, emotional and financial support to staff and *sangha* members who were "abused, threatened, molested, physically attacked or intimidated in any manner."

● And what of Bhanwari?

Bhanwari is a feminist icon, and her name and story are known across the world. She has won numerous awards and honours, including from the Government of India. She spoke at the Beijing Conference and at the National Conferences of Women's movements in different parts of India.

But justice still eludes her. The Rajasthan High Court has refused to transfer the case to a fast track court despite giving it just one hearing in the last 29 years.

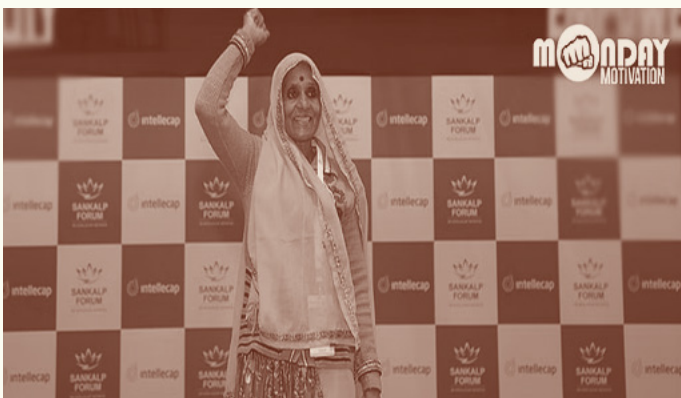
Four of the accused have died. So has Bhanwari's husband, who was her constant support through the years. Her sons, who bravely faced abuse and humiliation in school and college are estranged from her now, and blame her for destroying their lives. Her only support is her daughter Rajeshwari, a school teacher with a post-graduate degree.

Bhanwari has endured three decades of hardship and humiliation. The last straw for her was a [Bollywood film based on her story](#). Bhanwari feels cheated – the film has not advanced her case as she had hoped. Instead, it has fueled a fresh wave of taunts, this time from youngsters who egg each other on to go and “watch the potter whose wife got raped”.

In a widely circulated [BBC interview in 2017](#) Bhanwari was asked if she felt afraid, living in the same village and doing the same work as before. “Not for a minute,” she answered fiercely. “Didn't you just walk into my house when you came here today? Would I leave my doors unlocked if I was afraid?” she asks. Her husband Mohan Lal added “What is there to fear? They can kill us only once.”

[Meeting her in 2021](#), after her husband's death, a reporter from the Hindustan Times found her looking old and frail, struggling to cope with her loneliness and ill-health. She was no longer working and was surviving on a small government pension. She had no regrets about her actions, but seemed to have lost hope of her case ever being heard. “So what if this court did not give me justice?” she said “I will get justice in God's court”.

The life of this extraordinary woman who inspired a 30-year long protest by women's movements



embodies the “irony of iconhood”. Her experiences with the government, the courts, journalists, film-makers, researchers and development organisations have left her scarred. Bhanwari’s anguished response to a question at a meeting in 2013 revealed her disillusionment with the strategy of legal reform. “Round them up and beat them” she said.

Due to its negligent drafting, the POSH Act is not likely to be of use to women in the informal sector. Under the Act, Bhanwari Devi would be the “aggrieved woman”, employed as a saathin in the “workplace” under Rajasthan’s Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD). She has the option of reporting the incident to the DWCD’s internal complaints committee (ICC). Given the ambit of the relief the ICC is authorised to provide under the Act, coupled with the serious charges levied against the perpetrators, it appears ludicrous to refer such a complaint to the ICC. Therefore, Bhanwari Devi will have no other option but to file a criminal complaint.

○ From The Wire, 2017

Bhanwari’s anguish and frustration after three decades of struggle demands some serious reflection by women’s movements on the strategies they have developed for legal reform.

For instance, it is ironic that the Visakha Guidelines for which Bhanwari’s case was the motivating factor, would not be of much use to Bhanwari herself. The Visakha Guidelines are framed in the context of organised office-like workplaces, and cannot be extrapolated to the informal sector and other areas where the employer-employee relationship is not fixed.

The Visakha Guidelines and the subsequent POSH Act have shifted the focus from rape and sexual assault to less heinous acts such as physical contact and advances, a demand or request for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks and showing pornography. Yet, rape and sexual assault are daily realities faced by Dalit women working in agriculture and the informal sector. If Bhanwari’s rape were to happen today, she would still have to file a criminal case and place her faith in the legal process.

● The Khairlanji rapes and murders (2006)

On 29 September 2006, four members of a Dalit family in Khairlanji village in Maharashtra were lynched by a mob consisting of practically the entire population of the village. Surekha Bhotmange and her daughter Priyanka were attacked, sexually assaulted and gang-raped.

Both women, along with Surekha's sons Roshan (20) and Sudhir (19, visually disabled) were then stripped and paraded through the village, while being assaulted with iron rods, bicycle chains and sharp weapons as people, including women, watched and egged on the attackers. When they finally died after two hours of torture, their bodies were mutilated, loaded into a trailer and taken to a canal where they were thrown into the water. The only survivor of the assault was Surekha's husband, Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange, who fled the village when he heard the mob shouting his name as they approached his hut.

In those days before smartphones and social media, the case was reported in the national media only after a report from a joint fact-finding by several human rights groups (Vidharba Jan Andolan Samiti) broke the silence, a week after the killings. The fact-finding team called on the National Human Rights Commission to intervene, pointing out that the police had registered a case but not a single witness statement had been recorded.

More details emerged as journalists and activists visited the village and spoke to Bhaiyyalal and other witnesses. The Bhotmanges, one of only three Dalit Buddhist families in the village, had a small piece of land and had achieved a comparatively better standard of living than many of their caste Hindu neighbours. The police were well aware of the fact that the Bhotmanges had been ostracised by the upper-caste families in the village because of a land dispute. Bhaiyyalal had already been

beaten by some caste Hindus when he opposed them cutting across his fields, and had complained to the police. In 2002, Surekha had filed a police complaint against a neighbour for trespassing on her land and abusing her with casteist epithets. Priyanka, Surekha's daughter, was harassed with lewd comments as she cycled to school. She had reported the harassment to a family friend Siddharth Gajbhiye, who reprimanded the caste Hindus but advised the Bhotmanges not to formally complain to the police. Surekha again filed a police complaint when some caste Hindu women attacked her with a sickle when she was working on her land. No action was taken by the police on any of these complaints. Siddharth Gajbhiye who supported the Bhotmanges was beaten by the villagers on the pretext of a wage dispute, but the local police refused to register a complaint. Finally, the hospital where he was admitted for treatment registered a complaint which was then transferred to the local police station. When the police came to take the statements of Surekha and Priyanka who were named as witnesses, the two women were openly threatened by the village leaders. Once again, the police watched but did nothing. Some people were arrested but soon released on bail. It was after the arrested men returned to the village that the caste Hindu community called a meeting and resolved to teach the Bhotmanges a lesson.

Even after the murders, the police did all they could to subvert the case and destroy the evidence. Priyanka's body, the first to be found, was seen and

identified by Bhaiyyalal but this was not recorded. The post mortem report did not mention rape and sexual assault, despite photos showing mutilation of the genitals and wounds on the breasts. Vaginal swabs were not taken and the viscera were not preserved. The body was quickly cremated as an “unclaimed and unidentified” corpse. The same was the case with the bodies of the two boys. Once again, the post mortem report does not mention the mutilation of the genitals and face that are clearly visible in the photos. As before, the bodies were quickly cremated by the police, effectively destroying the evidence. An official enquiry by the Maharashtra Institute of Public Administration recommended suspension and criminal charges against several senior officers, some of them Dalits.

There is ample evidence that the vendetta against the Bhotmanges, culminating in the lynching, was a caste crime, an act of vengeance against a Dalit family for their refusal to be cowed down by the caste hierarchy. Nevertheless, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 was not invoked in any of the complaints. When the case documents were finally sent to the Assistant Public Prosecutor, she did not point out or rectify the omission. Despite literally hundreds of eye-witnesses, photographs and evidence collected by young activists and fact-finding teams, the rapes and the caste factor were simply wiped off the record.

Initial reports in the media did not mention the caste identity of the victims or the fact of the land dispute, and claimed that the lynching was a consequence of community outrage at Surekha’s “illicit relationship” with Siddharth Gajbhiye. They also alleged that the Bhotmanges were involved in illegal activities like distilling liquor.

As more and more evidence came to light, Dalit protests broke out all across the region in November 2006. The first protest against the collusion of the state and caste Hindus in perpetrating and then trying to cover up the atrocity was a peaceful march by a Dalit women’s group, the Sambuddha Mahila Sangathan. Young educated Dalits and intellectuals joined the protests

and came out on the streets to show their outrage against the killers and the police who shielded them. Women took the lead in most of these street protests. A group of 50 Dalit women activists and intellectuals evaded the security barriers and stormed into the Chief Minister’s room in the middle of a cabinet meeting. As the protests spread across the state, the government responded with extreme force. Huge and peaceful road blockades and rallies in Nagpur and Amravati were attacked by the police. Hundreds of protestors were injured, many were left with permanent disabilities and at least one person was killed in police firing. Protestors were demonised as “Naxalites” by the government and mainstream media. The hard-line stance of the government and the brutality of the police – the casteist epithets, the beatings in custody, the targeting of young protestors, the wholesale arrests of Dalits from their homes, the stonewalling of bail pleas – exposed the deep-rooted casteist underpinnings of the state machinery.

The media colluded with the state, depicting the lynchings as a “spontaneous act of moral outrage” and dismissing the protestors as lumpen mobs. A ground report by a woman reporter from The Times of India (a month after the atrocity) was the first time that the facts of the rapes and the land dispute were made public. The Home Minister finally admitted that there had been lapses in the investigation. The case was taken over by the CBI. In December 2006, 11 of the accused were charged with murder, unlawful assembly, assault with deadly weapons and “outraging the modesty” of women. Rape was not mentioned in the chargesheet.

In September 2008, a trial court found the accused guilty and sentenced six of the ringleaders to death, but termed it a “revenge killing”. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by the High Court on the grounds that the crime was not premeditated and did not meet the “rarest of the rare” criterion. There was no acknowledgement of the rapes or the caste hate behind the lynchings at any stage in the legal process.

Protests against the verdict again shook the state as Dalit communities gave vent to their anger and

frustration at the denial of justice and the court's refusal to name the crime as a caste atrocity. In 2010, after waiting for two years for the CBI to appeal against the High Court ruling, Bhayyalal Bhotmange filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the reduction of the sentence by the High Court. The appeal lapsed with Bhayyalal's death from a heart attack in January 2017. Two years later, the Supreme Court upheld the Bombay HC judgement in toto and closed the case.

Khairlanji helps dispel a number of myths - the myth that economic development does away with casteism, the myth of Maharashtra being a progressive state, the myth that there exists a significant progressive section of non-dalits that is against the caste system, the myth that dalits placed in the bureaucracy can orient the administration to do justice to dalits, and finally the mythology of 'bahujanwad' developed by the late Kanshiram and followed by other dalit leaders.

○ From Khairlanji and its aftermath: exploding some myths, Economic and Political Weekly (12/2007)

"The credit for forcing the mainstream media to recognise the facts of the case goes to local Dalit activists who took photos of the bodies as they were found, made posters of them with calls for protest, and circulated them to Dalit human rights groups and journalists."

○ From "Suppressing the Voice of the Oppressed" Report of the joint fact-finding by democratic rights groups 2007

The protests against the Khairlanji rapes and murders have been seen as a turning point for Dalit mobilisation. The protestors claimed the moral high ground with their collective and public expression of the "righteous anger of the powerless", strongly challenging the denial of their human worth by the state and by caste Hindus. While the atrocity itself was largely ignored by the national media, the protests and the issues raised by the protestors were both too large to be dismissed. These protests were also a public repudiation of Dalit politicians by ordinary people who mobilised spontaneously in huge numbers without the backing of any political party or leader, Dalit or otherwise.

Dalit feminists have critiqued the way in which various narratives have failed to recognise that Bahujan women are differently situated in social worlds where the violence inflicted on their bodies arises from the intersecting hierarchies of caste and gender. The proceedings in all three courts where the case was heard (the Sessions Court, the High Court and the Supreme Court) are evidence of the embedded patriarchal and casteist biases in the judicial process. Fifteen years after the judgement in Bhanwari's case, the Khairlanji judgements are still invoking the same misogynist and casteist arguments to hide or deny the reality of violence.

● The Nirbhaya case (2012)

On the foggy and cold night of 16 December 2012 in Delhi, Jyoti Pandey, a 23 year old physiotherapy intern and her young male friend were returning home from a cinema theatre where they had gone to see “Life of Pi”. They were waiting for a public bus, when a private bus with tinted windows drew up and offered them a ride home.

When they got in, they found the bus empty except for five men (one a juvenile) and the driver. The young man was punched and beaten with a tire iron. The young woman was raped repeatedly and assaulted with extreme brutality, violated with the tire iron and grievously injured. While this went on, the attackers took turns driving the bus driven round and round the area for two hours, appearing repeatedly on police cameras without sparking any concern or response from the police. Finally, the two were thrown out of the bus at a deserted spot under a flyover. They lay there bleeding and senseless, until found by a security guard who tried in vain to flag down passing vehicles, none of whom stopped to help. Finally, three hours later, a police patrol car turned up and the two young people were taken to hospital.

The young woman, referred to as Nirbhaya (“the fearless one”) in the media, was horribly injured with more than 20 wounds on her body and extensive damage to her internal organs. Although she was in a critical condition, she gave a detailed statement to the police. Despite all efforts to save her life, she succumbed to her injuries and died in a Singapore hospital 14 days after the assault. By then, all five of the accused had been arrested.

The public reaction to the rape was unprecedented. The day after the assault was reported, crowds of people – women’s groups, students, political organisations, neighbourhood associations, trade unions, and women and men who had never been at a protest before - spontaneously gathered in the centre of the city, around the symbols of state power, to express their grief and fury.



The protests continued every day, with protestors demanding the death sentence for the rapists and calling for action against the police for their lethargy and callousness. Police posted at the protest sites were attacked and crowds stormed the barricades. The police used water cannons and tear gas against the protestors and several were injured. This only served to intensify the anger and even more people joined the protests all over the country.

The protests were dominated by young people, with a sizeable representation of the middle class. Women's movement groups and progressive students' organisations were outnumbered but pushed hard to expand the frame beyond demanding swift justice and harsher penalties, to a focus on women's rights and freedoms, particularly freedom from the fear of violence. Social media tools were strategically used to coordinate across locations, record police brutality, ensure media coverage and build global support. The passion and power of the protests signalled the emergence of a new kind of "protest public" and a new semiotics of protest.

There was intense media coverage of the protests on both national and global media. Some commentators pointed to the noticeable shifts in the language and tone of newspaper reports as the protests escalated, from a focus on the victim to serious discussions on the need to address India's "rape culture". At the same time, many TV channels capitalised on the spectacle of the protests to ramp up their TRPs by stoking the public frenzy around the demand for hanging the rapists. Feminist opposition to the death penalty found little traction either with the public or with Nirbhaya's parents.

Alarmed both by the protests and by international scrutiny, the government acted with unprecedented alacrity. Instead of the usual infinitely extended timeline, the suspects were arrested, investigations completed and charges filed within a month of the rape.

The trial was completed by a fast-track court and death sentences pronounced for the five adult convicts in just nine months. Throughout the trial, crowds surrounded the court chanting "Death to the rapists". The Supreme Court turned down the appeal against the death sentence, justifying it as necessary to satisfy the "collective conscience of society".

The convicted juvenile was sent to a reformatory institution for three years – a move that attracted the ire of many protestors who continued to demand the death penalty for him.

Seven years later, after the suicide of the main accused and the rejection of a series of appeals and mercy petitions, all four men were hanged.

"Instead of compelling the state to invest in plugging the gaps in the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of sexual crimes, and formulating victim oriented processes, the clamour for execution of the convicts has hijacked the discourse."

○ From Vrinda Grover. The Hindu 20 March 2020

Much has been written on the impact of the case and the protests, in terms of the incidence of rape, media reportage of violence, support systems for rape survivors, women's safety, campaign strategies against violence and the public discourse on rape.

The most substantive outcome of the Nirbhaya protests was the setting up of the Justice Verma Committee within a week of the rape. The three-member Committee was mandated to recommend amendments to the Criminal Law so as to provide for quicker trial and enhanced punishment for sexual offences against women. The Committee submitted its report in exactly one month.

● The Justice Verma Committee

The recommendations of the Verma Committee include almost all the demands made by women's movements in the four decades since the Mathura case.

This was no coincidence – the Committee drew extensively on the detailed submissions and supporting documents from women's movement groups and feminists with decades of experience in working on these issues. The day after its formation, the Committee issued a notice inviting suggestions from “all members of the public”, to be submitted via e-mail and fax.

The effort at public consultation was publicised as a first-of-its-kind step and a signal of the government's seriousness on the issues. This claim was punctured when it was pointed out that this was nothing more than normal democratic practice. It was also pointed out that only taking submissions by fax or e-mail would exclude a large number of people with valuable experience and expertise but without access to technology.

A far more serious issue was the fact that the general invitation to “the public” ignored and undermined the huge body of work done by women's movements on the legal framework on violence against women. As senior jurists, all three Committee members were well aware of this work but had failed to create space for separate and focused consultations with representatives of women's movements.

Determined lobbying by a leading feminist lawyer had an impact: a public hearing was organised for women's movements, feminist activists, human rights groups and human rights lawyers to make their case directly to the committee while also filing detailed written submissions.

The final report of the Committee acknowledges inputs from women's groups, most of which were included in the recommendations.

The Verma Committee report was welcomed by women's groups as a paradigm shift in the legal understanding of violence against women.

The Committee acknowledged that they had changed their earlier recommendation on the death penalty for rape, after hearing from women's groups who were firmly opposed to it. The Committee's recommendation on “revisiting AFSPA” would not have come without the testimonies by women from the North East showing how AFSPA enables sexual violence.

We were shocked when, a mere 20 days before the upcoming Parliament session, the government hurriedly passed an ordinance to amend the rape laws that reflected neither the letter or the spirit of the Verma Committee Report. The ordinance disregarded several key recommendations: criminalisation of marital rape, new provisions on the offence of breach of command responsibility, removal of sanction for prosecuting a member of the security forces accused of sexual assault and rape under ordinary criminal law for sexual crimes; change in the definition of consent to any sexual act; and removal of the death penalty were all ignored.

Women's groups slammed the ordinance and appealed to the President to reject it. The outcry went unheeded and the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, 2013 that followed the ordinance was duly passed by Parliament. A few welcome changes

were introduced, such as an expanded definition of rape, an unambiguous definition of consent, and the recognition of acid attacks, stalking and stripping as sexual crimes. The requirement of prior sanction for prosecution of government servants was removed, and an explanation to this effect was added to Section 197 of the Indian Penal Code. However, several provisions of the new law cemented the privileging of morality and the family over women's autonomy, freedoms and rights, effectively consigning women to a permanent state of sexual emergency.

Women's groups responded with a detailed critique of the Bill, welcoming some of its provisions, explaining why some others were unacceptable and dangerous, and urging Members of Parliament to debate it before it passed into law.

Shockingly (but not surprisingly) the debate on the Bill in Parliament saw MPs making sexist and derogatory comments on various provisions of the bill while endorsing all its regressive elements. Key members of the ruling party were missing during the debate.

“Many of us have rigorously engaged with specific questions of legal reform pertaining to issues of violence against women. A strong demand for amendment of laws relating to sexual violence commenced in the 1980's pursuant to the judgment of the Supreme Court in the Tuka Ram v State of Maharashtra (AIR 1979 SC 185), which led to some amendments in the criminal laws. Campaigns for further law reform, particularly on the aspect of sexual violence against women, have continued ever since.

The reason for mentioning these earlier engagements with the government is

to draw the attention of this Committee to the fact that in the recent past, amendments to the law relating to sexual violence have been proposed and submitted in writing to the government. The government has on each occasion failed to take on board or engage with these proposals.

It is perhaps for this reason that I approach this Committee with some skepticism and fatigue...

○ Advocate Vrinda Grover, submission to the Justice Verma Committee

The Nirbhaya protests and the struggle to influence the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, 2013 left women's movements with some gains, some scars and many questions.

What did we gain from the exercise? The women's movement welcomed the new law as a definite advance over the old one. On the other hand, the overall framework remained deeply committed to the notion of women as perpetual subjects of custody, whose autonomy would threaten the family and undermine the social order. Do these exclusions neutralise the gains?

Many of the provisions of the amended law are the subject of internal debates among feminists. The continuing controversies around the gender-neutrality of the law reflect the often contradictory needs and demands of women, children, queer people and transgender people. Similarly, while accepting that there are instances of women inflicting sexual abuse on children or prisoners, feminists are apprehensive that a law that is gender neutral with regard to perpetrators would be weaponised to further target women. Then there are questions on how exactly the criminalisation of marital rape would play out in reality. By making marital rape a crime rather than a valid ground for

divorce, are we playing into the notion of marriage as a sacred institution?

“Despite Indian feminists’ clear position against the death penalty, our responses to emotionally charged calls for “justice” through retribution seemed inadequate. In the face of the grave loss, anger, and trauma that gave rise to demands for revenge, how would feminist “rational” political reasoning stand its ground? How were we to converse with the parents who demanded the death penalty for the rapists who had brutally tortured, raped, and murdered their twenty-three-year-old daughter?”

○ Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sarkar (2013)

For many of us, there is also a persistent sense of anguish around the moments when women’s movements found ourselves swimming against the tide, struggling and failing to hold up a mirror to the casteist, classist, majoritarian biases that were shaping the protests and the public discourse.

Our opposition to the demand for the death penalty became an alienating issue. Many of us have personal experiences of being cornered at protests and having to defend ourselves against accusations of “supporting the rapists”. A senior feminist lawyer who approached Nirbhaya’s mother to plead for compassion was viciously trolled by right-wingers. Influential media personalities came out in support of the death penalty, further reinforcing the notion of justice as revenge and retribution.

“The spectacle of judicial reform has all the elements of cinematic imagination built into it—violence, voyeurism, repression, tears, scandal, redemption

and betrayal. We are all consumers and participants of this judicial spectacle. We veer between manic hope and dark despair as we are left conjecturing how this theatre of judicial reform will enact equality and dignity for survivors of sexual assault.”


○ Pratiksha Baxi (2013)

The demands that have been excluded from the law – the refusal to recognise the intersection of class, caste and patriarchy reflected in targeted sexual violence against Dalits and Adivasis; the legal protection from prosecution for members of the armed forces who perpetrate sexual violence; protection from scrutiny for the family; the retention of the death penalty - all validate the feminist analysis of the neoliberal state as an institution that draws its power from the violent enforcement of existing hierarchies of class, caste, and patriarchal power and privilege.

“Feminists have had mixed views on the appropriate reaction to violence in national legal systems. While many of us have long been skeptical of systems of criminal justice, many have still supported the strict application of existing law and called for stronger penalties. We live with the contradictions. We know that focusing on individual acts of violence against women can obscure the structural relations of power and domination that make them possible. We oppose the law and order agenda..... And we want the police to come when we call.”

○ Richa Sharma and Susan Bazilli (2014)

The experience with the Verma Committee and the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013 has also revived the conversation around the limits of legal reform as a transformational strategy.



Feminist analyses of legal and social discourses around rape law have shown that ensuring justice to all women has never been the concern of the law. The government rejected all those recommendations of the Verma Committee that would have brought specially vulnerable categories of women under the ambit of the law: the recommendation on criminalising marital rape, the recommendation of recognising sexual violence against Dalit women as aggravated rape, and the recommendation of removing the cover of impunity provided to the armed forces in “disturbed areas”. Married women, Dalit women and women in areas under the control of the armed forces are thus specifically excluded from the protection of the law.

Is it time then to “take a break from the state” and the doomed project of trying to “dismantle the house of the master with the tools of the master”? Or do the amendments to rape law, flawed though they may be, provide us with opportunities to expand the jurisprudence on feminist concepts of violence, consent, agency and desire? Ten years after the new law, these questions are still alive.

The dilemmas remain, but we cannot conclude this section without acknowledging the many empowering and enriching spaces that grew out of our engagement with the Nirbhaya case and its aftermath. One such space was opened up by ‘India’s Daughter’ a BBC film on the Nirbhaya case. The tumult of intelligent, concerned and strongly articulated opinions that poured out on feminist lists, discussion groups, blogs, feminist discussion circles and cultural commentaries, opening up complex questions around the rights of convicted criminals, the meaning of informed consent, our responses to cultural expressions that we find offensive, representations of violence and the way we interpret these representations, whether we all “see” the same thing when we watch a film – we have all been enriched by raising and discussing many such questions.

These debates and conversations carry a powerful message: the same internal tensions and controversies that threaten to disrupt our feminist solidarities can also open up spaces for us to look inward, critique our own stands, and strengthen our collective politics and feminist praxis.



Ten years later: The Hathras case

Almost a decade after the historic Verma Committee report, the Hathras rape and murder case forced us to look back and ask ourselves whether the amended rape laws had made the road to justice any smoother.

- The crime took place on 14 September 2020 in a village in Uttar Pradesh. The victim, a 19-year-old Dalit woman had gone to a farm with her mother to collect cattle fodder.
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Four men from the powerful Thakur caste dragged her away into a millet field, injuring her spine in the process. The four men tried to rape her – when she resisted, they tried to strangle her with a dupatta. In the struggle, she bit through her tongue. Her screams alerted her mother and brother who ran to the spot and found her stripped, bleeding and semi-conscious. They immediately took her to the local police station, an hour away. The police refused to register an FIR and humiliated the family, telling them to take the girl away. The family took her to a local hospital where the doctors confirmed that she had serious spinal injuries and referred her to the Aligarh Medical College Hospital.

The police came to the hospital to record her statement a week after the assault, much after the maximum period for collection of evidence of rape. Though grievously injured, the young woman gave her statement three times – once at the police station where she was first taken, once to the police in the hospital, and once to a magistrate (taken on the record as her dying declaration). Videos of all three statements were circulated on social media at the time (and later added to the case file) and show her naming the prime accused, describing the rape and saying that she was strangled because she resisted. She shows her lacerated tongue when asked if the men hurt her. She names the primary accused and says that he raped her because he had a grudge against her. In the last statement, she names the remaining three men and says they sexually assaulted her. All four of the men were arrested within the next few days.

The videos attracted public attention and increased media coverage. Several media people visited the hospital and spoke to the girl and her family. A week after she had been admitted, a medico-legal examination was carried out by the hospital. The report confirmed the rape and forwarded the report and samples to the State Forensic Laboratory.

Meanwhile, the victim's condition deteriorated and she was shifted to a hospital in Delhi, where she succumbed to her injuries, two weeks after the assault. The autopsy report found the cause of death to be injury to the spine, and mentions rape and strangulation as part of the medical history. Even before the family was informed of the death, the police removed the body from the mortuary, took it back to the village and hurriedly cremated it in a field at dead of night. The family was confined in their home under heavy police guard and was not allowed to view the body or perform the customary rituals. Senior officials pressurised the family to withdraw their statement and threatened them with consequences if they “created trouble”. An independent enquiry by a team of activists from social movements records the anguish of the family and the intimidation they continue to face at the hands of the police and administration.

The police and senior officials continued to brush off the allegations of rape, citing the forensic report which did not find any semen in the swabs, disregarding the fact that the samples were taken much after the outer limit of three days after the rape. Their assertions were countered by forensic and legal experts who pointed out several obfuscations in the official version.

Rattled by the international media coverage and the public outcry, the government hired a well-known PR firm to counter the family's claims, alleging an "international conspiracy" to foment caste tension. A ban on public assembly was invoked to prevent leaders from the Congress and other opposition parties from meeting the family. Police complaints under stringent sections of the law were filed against those who extended support to the family.

The head of the media cell of the ruling party now jumped into the fray and posted a video of the victim, revealing her identity. Others from right-wing outfits sought to deflect and dilute the charge of rape by claiming that there was a "romantic relationship" between her and the primary accused and asserting that the murder was an "honour killing" by her family. Ruling party politicians and upper-caste bodies rallied in support of the accused, who they claimed were being framed by the Dalits. The family was publicly threatened, and was provided with a round-the-clock police guard, effectively putting them under house arrest.

No action has been taken against any of the upper-caste outfits, who continue to terrorise and harass the family on social media. On the other hand, the leader of the Bhim Army, a Dalit political formation, mobilised Dalit groups from across the region to stand with the family and demand justice. He and several of the protestors were arrested. Four journalists from a media collective in Kerala were arrested as they were on their way to the village. All four are Muslims, and were charged under draconian sedition and terror laws and endured imprisonment under harsh conditions for two years before being granted bail by the High Court.

Despite these attempts to silence calls for justice, the outrage generated by the case and the clumsy attempts at covering it up put the government on the defensive. The case was handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation, which completed the investigation and filed charges of rape and murder against the four accused in October 2020. The chargesheet also flagged negligence by the local police at various points in the process.

Some of the policemen have been suspended, but no action has been taken against any of the senior officers who have been named in connection with various violations.

The rape and murder case is being heard by a special court. The Covid lockdown has delayed and slowed down the trial. Angry upper caste mobs have stormed the court and forced the judge to adjourn the proceedings. The district court sentenced the prime accused to life imprisonment and acquitted the rest. The defence and the prosecution have both appealed against the verdict in the High Court.

Meanwhile, the victim's family is confined at home, under constant surveillance from the police, facing intimidation and threats from the accused and ostracised by their neighbours. Their lawyer has been abused and attacked during court appearances.

The family is still waiting for justice and is demanding the death penalty for all the rapists. Until then, they say, they will remain in mourning.

The Hathras case has eerie echoes of others that have wound their way through the courts without providing either justice or closure to survivors and the families of those who did not survive.

Like the Nirbhaya case, the Hathras case too attracted media coverage and international concern. Yet, this gruesome violence failed to stir the "public conscience" or bring middle-class youth out on the streets to call for "death to the rapists".

Although women's movements called for nationwide protests, the response was not overwhelming. Was this because the location, a nondescript village in a northern state known for its dismal record on rape, did not resonate with the rest of India in the same way as happenings in Delhi? Was it because the profile of the victim did not evoke the "this could have been me" sentiment among urban middle-class youth?

Was it the changed political situation and the personal risks of breaking the Covid lockdown rules? Or was it the caste of the victim that muted our response?

“The two incidents of alleged gang rape and murder of dalit women are separated by 14 long years, during which India’s collective conscience and sensitivity to such crimes was supposedly sharpened by the Nirbhaya case, but the arc of safety and security does not bend any more towards women—especially dalit women—now than it did in 2006. On the contrary, crimes against dalit women, especially assault and rape, have increased manifold.”

○ [from a Newsclick report](#)

For Dalit feminists, the Hathras case was the final straw – proof that nothing much had changed in the [14 years after Khairlanji](#). Once again, savarna feminists were taking up the leadership space and going by their own “[casteless](#)” [analysis of rape](#). Dalit feminists questioned whether the middle class and upper caste women who dominate mainstream women’s movements have the [ability to rise above their own caste locations](#) and fight for the security of all women.

As feminists, we would all agree that [caste is the most pertinent and compelling factor](#) in analysing sexual violence in India. We know that violence is intrinsic to [Brahminical patriarchy](#), the structural framework of gender, caste and class relations that constitute the [social order](#). Violence, particularly sexual violence, is used both to enforce the norms and to punish those who bend or break them.

Public violence perpetrated on Dalit women – rape, assault, stripping and parading, beating, branding, mutilation – are all [double-bladed weapons](#) of caste hierarchy. Apart from marking the body of

the woman as public property, these acts are also meant to humiliate Dalit men for not being able to protect “their” women.

“I would like to pose a set of unanswered questions about the contrasting treatment of the 2012 Delhi rape and cases involving the rapes of Dalit women.

Did the so-called justice in the form of capital punishment in the case of Nirbahya spring from some hidden agenda of controlling the unrest in the state, or because the protest was of a different caste?

Why is the treatment of reporting and handling of the cases not the same for the mother-daughter of Khairlanji, the young woman of Hathras, or the thousands of Dalit women who are regularly subjected to rape and torture by upper-caste rapists?

Is it sufficient to punish defendants in a few high profile cases to quell protests while, at the same time, preserving the powerful hold of caste in society by allowing Dalit women to suffer?

Is there some kind of balance and status quo that the state is indirectly or directly favoring so as to keep everything the way it was?

○ [The Constitution of the Hathras Victim's Body](#)
Amrapali Mondol (2020)

It is not a coincidence that the attempts to stall and undermine the legal process in the Hathras case (as in other cases of targeted violence against Dalit

women) are spearheaded by the institutions tasked with implementing the law. Despite affirmative action through reservations, the majority of police, lawyers, judges, doctors and bureaucrats belong to the privileged castes. No surprise then, that casteism pervades all levels of government.

Studies of the legal process in cases of rape of Dalit girls in the northern state of Haryana and the southern state of Kerala have documented the ways in which caste and patriarchal solidarities undermine institutional protocols and distort the legal process. Despite the very different demographics, social and political histories and levels of human development in these two States, the strategies of discrimination follow the same trajectories.

The same caste solidarities that come into play to evade invoking the Atrocities Act when Dalit women are raped, are also deployed to ensure swift trial and maximum punishment in cases where Dalits are accused of sexual violence against upper caste women.

“That’s why Dalit women’s bodies can be made an easy site of violence: there’s no risk, no price to pay, the perpetrator is confident about the impunity, the social-political protection he gets by virtue of being from a ruling caste. This used to be an implicit bias—a tendency to favour—but now it’s totally brazen and demanded as a right. We even saw a ‘Rashtriya Savarna Parishad’ come out in support of the rapists—the ‘betas’ of the community who can never do anything wrong. Boys will be boys. And Thakur boys will be Thakur boys.”

○ Here’s Why Caste Matters (Outlook report)

Middle class and upper caste women’s movements often fail to recognise that violence against Dalit women is not analogous to violence against upper-caste women. Social media comments on the Hathras case - “Don’t bring caste into this” and “Rape is rape, it’s not about her caste” - show just how wide the gulf is between this blindness and the lived realities of Dalit women.

A striking illustration of this gulf comes from the reporting on the Hathras case by Khabar Lahariya, a feminist media collective where most of the reporters are Dalits. Instead of joining the rest of the media and badgering the grief-stricken family for sensational details, this team focused on the everyday reality of caste discrimination in this state. They point out that violence against women is both structural and strategic. Laws around sexual assault and even the Atrocities Act, meant to address structural discrimination and abuse, can be used as levers to broker more lucrative and faster out-of-court settlements. The worst of these cases never come to light.

The Hathras case once again brought into sharp relief the failure of women’s movements to build sensitive allyship between Dalit and savarna feminists, proving the point often made by Dalit feminists – that theorising intersectionality is easier than practising it. Dalit feminist scholars have called out Indian feminist writings for denying the agency of Dalit women and disregarding Dalit feminist scholarship.

Dalit feminism and Women's Movements in India

Khairlanji was a wound on the collective psyche of the Dalit community. The extreme brutality of the attack and the mutilation of the bodies caused immense social suffering and kindled an explosion of righteous anger. To cover up the fact that Surekha and her daughter were killed in retaliation for their temerity in filing a police complaint against their upper-caste neighbours, the killers blamed Surekha for having an extra-marital relationship. The mainstream media played into this story of the Khairlanji carnage as a fallout of village society trying to “correct” the sexual conduct of Dalit women.

“The projection of “sexual immorality” of a dalit woman by the mainstream media and the absence of purity in her caste and gender position left the Khairlanji rape and murder untouched by the media, masses and the state.”

○ Khairlanji and the English Press (Punwani 2006)

Despite the evidence of gruesome sexual violence in Khairlanji, the “mainstream” (for want of a better word) women’s movement, primarily metropolitan in its character, failed to respond to the massacre with the kind of outrage and righteous anger that was being expressed on the streets by Dalit activists. Dalit women who identified with the women’s movement were left feeling bitter and betrayed.

This moment of anguish once again highlighted the long-standing tensions between Dalit women and Savarna women (women from the privileged castes) in women’s movements. In the early years, many Dalit women were part of the autonomous women’s groups that were emerging on the national stage. These supposedly inclusive groups were unprepared when Dalit women, mostly silent (or silenced) thus far, began to express their discontent at the ways in which the different-ness and distinctiveness of their social experience was overlooked or trivialised in feminist theorisation and activism. For instance, when Dalit women pushed for including a call for an end to manual scavenging to a Women’s Day campaign in Delhi, they were ignored by the joint action committee of women’s groups.

By the 1990s, a large number of Dalit women had broken away from women’s organisations and formed their own autonomous groups. Apart from the large organisations at the national level (such as the National Federation of Dalit Women, the All-India Dalit Women’s Forum and the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights), strong organisations of working-class Dalit women emerged in the Western and Southern states. In Maharashtra for instance, the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana, the Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad and the Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana (an organisation of Dalit Christian women) were all founded in the 1990s.

These groups went beyond the assertion of difference to build a situated and intersectional analysis of the “triple oppression” of Dalit women by class power and the exploitation of their labour; by the stigma of caste and violence by the upper castes, and by patriarchy through sexual violence and daily assaults on their dignity.

A serious debate on the differences and tensions between women’s movements and Dalit feminist movements was kicked off in 1995, when Gopal Guru, a Dalit intellectual, published a provocative essay titled “Dalit women speak differently”. He argued that the existential experience of Dalit women was so different from that of other women that mainstream women’s groups could never really represent them or even understand them. On the other hand, Dalit women had an epistemic advantage, since their position at the bottom of the hierarchy gave them a more encompassing view of social reality. In his view, only independent and autonomous organisations of Dalit women could carry forward their struggles against caste while rejecting the hegemonic and homogenising influence of Savarna women’s movements.

“The assertion of autonomous dalit women’s organisations in the 1990s threw up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of dalit politics... The apparent absence of a revisioning of feminist politics only suggests an ideological position of multiple/plural feminist standpoints. Within such a framework of ‘difference’ issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the dalit women’s organisations. This absence of an exploration of different positions hinders dialectics, both of a revisioning of contemporary feminist politics and a sharpening of the positions put forth by autonomous dalit women’s organisations.”

○ Sharmila Rege (1998)

The essay was widely read and sparked a series of discussions and debates among women’s movements. A powerful intervention came from Sharmila Rege, a feminist scholar of caste, who pointed out that privileging knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience as authenticity ran the risk of feeding into a narrow identity politics, limiting the emancipatory potential of Dalit women’s organisations and their epistemological standpoints. As a feminist committed to building alliances based on a shared politics, she argued for a Dalit feminist standpoint grounded in the multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory subjectivities of Dalit women.

It would be emancipatory for all feminist to ground their theory and practice in the experiences of Dalit women, rejecting the limited and weak

epistemological standpoints of upper caste women who refuse to recognise and acknowledge their own privilege. Rege called for a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste and sexuality all construct each other.

This theoretical position – essentially, that all feminists need to reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists, thereby transforming themselves into oppositional and collective subjects – has not been explored by Indian women’s movements with the seriousness that it deserves.

[The] caste system, both as hegemony and political structure works against the unity of Indian women. For centuries this scene is not altered. We, Dalit women, therefore request you to recognize that it is not just male domination but castist patriarchy which is at force in India. We ask you to rethink. We want you to acknowledge the political importance of ‘difference’, i.e. heterogeneity, that exists among Indian female community. That you are made whereas we are mutilated. You are put on a pedestal, whereas we are thrown into fields to work day and night. You were made Satis [chaste women], we were made harlots. Dear sisters, do not take this as an emotional, parochial supplication made by a few privileged dalit women. Recognition of difference is fundamental to any democratic politics...

○ Alisamma Women’s Collective (2002)

Writing in 2002, the Alisamma Collective, a group of young Dalit women who named themselves after Alisamma, a survivor who bore witness to the Karamachedu massacre of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, reached out through their manifesto to men and women who were not Dalits themselves but could be part of a collective democratic politics. Their manifesto is a call for the kind of embodied engagement that can nurture transformative relationships across social locations.

Twenty years after that powerful appeal, it is surely time for women's groups and feminists to ask how successful we been in embracing a Dalit feminist standpoint and transforming ourselves into "oppositional and collective subjects" capable of critiquing and transforming our own feminist politics.

The tensions and controversies have emerged again and again. Not many feminist groups have engaged deeply with the ways in which traditions are constructed and refracted through the lens of caste. Sharp disagreements have erupted during debates on sexual labour and caste based occupations.

In March 2005, the government of Maharashtra state in India announced a ban on women performing in dance bars, at first in the entire state and subsequently extending it to the bars in Mumbai. Women's movements were divided between supporting the ban as necessary to end the exploitation of women by bar owners and customers, and opposing it as an infringement of women's right to work.

As the debate over the ban progressed, the 'troubled connection' between sexuality, labour and caste became a subject of controversy and discussion among feminists.

In September 2006, at the Seventh National Conference of Women's Movements in Kolkata, the discussions in the session on 'Caste-based identities, discriminations, struggles and challenges' further complicated these connections, with women in sex work and prostitution from across the country entering the debate.

Several Dalit-Bahujan activists pointed out that the support offered to the bar dancers from a section of the women's movements, even if it was in the name of protection of livelihood, amounted to a reinforcement of caste-based sexual exploitation

of women from the oppressed castes. There were equally feminist and sharply political positions on the other side, with Dalit sex workers collectives explaining and defending their stances on labour, dignity and bodily autonomy. They objected to the valorizing of bar dancing as a "professional choice", seeing it rather as the latest in a continuum of stigmatising of Dalit women for whom dancing was a traditional occupation - devadasis, jogatins and lavani performers – whose bodies were regarded as the property of men, purchasable and violatable at all times.

Their contention was borne out in a dramatic and embodied way when, at an impromptu evening performance by the bar dancers, some activists in the audience threw money onto the stage in the manner typical of male audiences at such performances.

○ From Kalyani's notes, the National Conference 2006

Dalit feminists continue to voice their frustration and anger with the failure of Savarna mainstream feminists to acknowledge the ways in which their caste privilege distorts their analysis and impacts their responses to violence against Dalit women. Dalit feminists have also critiqued metropolitan women's NGOs for depoliticising and exploiting the caste question.

Recent writings by Dalit scholars have pointed to the brahminical biases exhibited by savarna feminists, for instance by treating Dalit feminist discourse as 'other forms of writing' rather than as products of theoretical, intellectual, or academic scholarship.

"By and large, the autonomous women's movement, although it frequently challenged the injunctions of Manu and patriarchal Brahminical code, left the caste question unaddressed. Saying that Mathura was an Adivasi girl

or Bhanwari a dalit woman in no way addressed the role of caste in shaping our ideological and material lives in a caste-ridden society. (...) As our engagement with women in community-based action reduced dramatically, we lost the edge of radicalism. It became easier to campaign against the rape of a sathin as a women's issue rather than respond with a national campaign against the everyday sexual violence experienced by Dalit women agricultural workers...."

○ Manasa Women's Collective, (2002)

"(Savarna feminists) have furthered such deeply irresponsible concepts into mainstream feminist discourse; that is, 'graded patriarchies', and especially, 'Dalit patriarchy'. These misleading concepts have been appealed to without offering empirical evidence, or logical coherence, or even theoretical necessity. Misdirection of just this sort serves to give credence to the increasingly posited ascription of mainstream Indian feminism as a savarna feminism. That is, as a sort of feminism that privileges dominant caste Indian women, both in theory and in practice."

○ From Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader (Sunaina Arya and Akash Singh Rathore, 2020)

"Historically, both nationalist and feminist reformers, as well as the scholarly historiography, has neglected the presence of caste communities to focus on gender categories. Feminist scholars and women activists have also made gender-based oppression normative, thus excluding Dalit communities altogether. In so doing, feminists actually mask the ways class, gender and sexuality intersected with caste oppression and constructed a homogeneous Indian woman. Although some elite Savarna women were sympathetic to the cause of Dalit women, the former were also constrained by their caste locations, and many were complicit in reinforcing structures of difference and differentiation between castes and classes. As a result, Savarnas brought about a culturalization of caste that reified caste difference and also hid their complicity in its production... Many Savarna feminists have failed to mobilize or even deconstruct difference as a tool to initiate change.

○ Shailaja Paik (2024)

A new generation of Dalit feminists are challenging feminist researchers on questions of authenticity and representation, and calling for the active participation of dalit women in re-theorising gender and feminism.



Malathi Maithri, Salma, Sukirtharani and Kutti Revathi, are crucial, radical voices. Their work cannot be contained within their poetry alone, they are also active politically...Their poetry is incandescent in its construction, and explosive in its purpose. They are writing within and against a society that is seemingly progressive, a society that covers-up its male hegemony in various guises. Their feminism attacks the caste system...clamours loudly for female desire ...and tear apart the charade of Indian nationalism...In so many ways, it is poetry that says, 'Listen. Learn.'

○ From an interview with Meena Kandasamy
PEN Transmissions (June 2019)

Confrontations between the 'mainstream' women's movement and the Dalit feminist movement over the last two decades have led to some rethinking of positions and have opened the doors to dialogues between Dalit feminists and other strands of the women's movement. There are now several online spaces where Dalit feminists in India are talking to each other and connecting with other feminists and democratic movements including the Dalit diaspora. Ambedkarite feminists have evolved a powerful discourse against caste, Brahminical patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism and are carrying it into other spaces of resistance.

A new feminist praxis is emerging in creative arts and cultural spaces that are being reclaimed by Dalit feminist writers, poets, artists, actors, musicians and performers. Challenging the gatekeeping by the privileged castes, they are politicising the spaces and disrupting the norms and forms of their chosen fields.

"I perform dance compositions that were created or revived for the new elites by hereditary dance masters (nattuvanars) in my family, except that now, I perform these through my Bahujan body. Moreover, my performance is also rooted in my contemporary anti-caste stance through the inherited, distinctly modern vocabulary of the reinvented Bharatanatyam, shifting our focus away from the nationalist, religious content that dominates public representations of the art today. Through these interventions—through speech and performance—I hope to challenge basic understandings of the history and social constitution of Bharatanatyam as a corporeal and cultural practice."

○ Re-casteing the narrative of Bharatanatyam,
Nritya Pillai (February 2022)

Contentious debates around caste, the anger and sense of betrayal at the silence of mainstream feminists at critical junctures, the frustration at caste questions becoming the sole responsibility of Dalit women, the reluctance of savarna feminists to acknowledge their own caste privilege – all these are out in the open, no longer amenable to being swept under the carpet of “universal sisterhood”. The anger and bitterness are also out in the open and will continue to divide us in the years to come unless we take our dialogues forward and make a serious effort to build a new and transformatory feminist praxis.

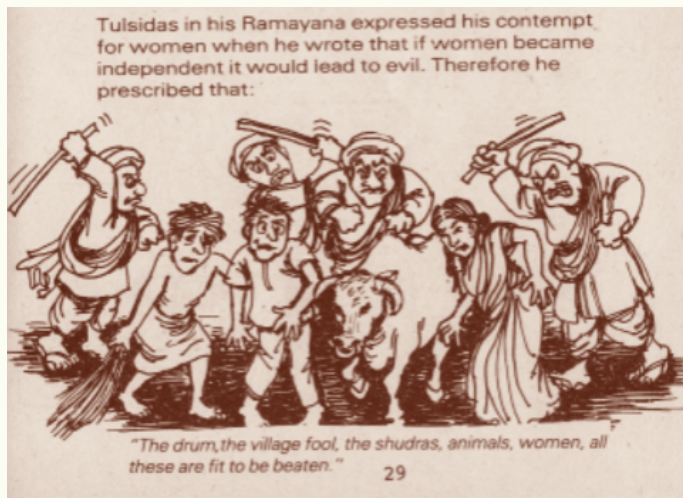
“This complaint of mine
Is against the orthodox culture
Which has imprisoned us in a
sealed room.
Which has given us the charity of life
Where the wind treats us as strangers
Where the monsoons give us
only famines
Where the water plays with us the
most inhuman game of mirage.
We are rejecting this unclean and
poisonous life.
And to escape from these cruel curses,
Will you give me a bright and
auspicious moon?
My countrymen, to your court I have
brought a complaint.
Will you give me justice?”

○ Hirabai Bansode (Translated by N.G.Bhavar)
From ‘Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit
Liberation Movement (Barbara R Joshi (ed)

“Brides are not for burning”

The decade of the 1980s saw an expansion of feminist engagements with the state.

These were the years in which feminist activism and feminist lawyering breached the ramparts of the sacred institutions of the home and family, subjecting them to scrutiny and marking them out as danger zones for women.



Laying down the rules

"A wife, a son, a slave, a pupil, and a (younger) brother of the full blood, who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo."

○ (Chapter 8, rule no. 299, Law of Manu, translated. George Bühler)

"Drums, fools, animals, shudras and women - all these are fit to be beaten"

○ (Widely quoted saying attributed to Tulsidas, 16th century devotee of Lord Rama, who authored eight versions of the Ramayana) Demystification of the Law for Women, Nandita Haksar (1986)

"Dowry deaths" was the term used by the media for the sudden deaths of young brides who were being pressurised by dowry demands from their marital families. In almost all cases, these deaths were labelled suicides or accidents. The early 1980s saw a startling rise in the number of such cases in Delhi and urban areas of north India. For feminists, these deaths were dowry murders, irrefutable evidence of the violence that women faced within the family.

By breaching the hitherto impermeable boundary separating the private space of the home from the rest of the world, women's protests against dowry murders smashed the myth of the home as a benign and safe space for women. The categorisation of dowry murder as custodial violence drew a direct connection between the supposedly "sacred space" of home and family, and unsavoury public locations like police stations and prisons.

It took the activism and intervention of women's groups for the recognition that what lay behind occasional newspaper reports of women dying in "kitchen accidents" or "committing suicide by burning themselves to death" was a quite different phenomenon. Before women's groups named this issue, demonstrated against it and drew media attention to it, few Indians were aware that there was a growing pattern of women being burnt to death for dowry-related reasons in "respectable middle-class Indian families."

○ Uma Narayanan (1997)

As if this was not enough, feminists also attacked the ecosystem of caste and community institutions that endorsed and valorised the violence in the name of caste or religious "custom and tradition". Dowry violence was thus protected from scrutiny and made into a "family affair", a "small matter" that could be easily sorted out with some "adjustment" on the part of the bride.

The feminist counterview – that violence was no "small matter" but a serious violation of human rights – found resonance among a large section of people. Young women who were themselves facing dowry violence; young men who had seen their mothers and sisters suffer; middle-class parents seeking justice for their daughters, even some religious leaders - all came out on the streets to demand action against dowry and justice for the murdered women.

"Dowry and dowry deaths transformed the quality and character of activism, translating the feminist assertion of the personal as political. Harassment, atrocities, and deaths within the four walls of private space, brought under public glare, stunned the nation and evoked widespread anger. It was a momentous phase for the women's

movement. A broad platform, Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch, was formed, including a diverse range of women's groups, cutting across political and feminist lines. Among them, Mahila Dakshata Samiti was the first in Delhi's feminist movement to take up the issue of dowry and Stri Sangharsh made it a household term.....

Protests against dowry in the 1980s assumed unconventional forms; protestors directly confronted the harassers face to face, shaming them within the community. Campaign strategies emerged spontaneously: protest demonstrations outside the house of the murdered woman, calling for a social boycott of the family, going straight from the site of the crime to the local police station to demand swift action to arrest the culprits. Men and women from the neighbourhood would join the protest and endorse the calls for social boycott. Police too did not intervene to stop the demonstrations."

○ From a feminist infopack on dowry murders (Jagori, 1997)

As the burnt bodies of young women were carried out from their marital homes, the masks and illusions around marriage and family, carefully nurtured for generations, began to fall apart. The picture that emerged revealed a very South Asian form of patriarchy, sustained by compulsory marriage (and hence compulsory heterosexuality) at the direction of parents and family elders, and iron-clad cultural norms that barred a women from leaving a bad marriage or returning to her marital home, no matter

what she suffered. In such a society, women were doomed to suffer “from womb to tomb” as we often said in our slogans and posters.

“Most of the dowry deaths in Delhi were from burns – invariably, these would be attributed to the kerosene stove bursting while the young woman was cooking and the death would be recorded as an accident. I remember how we used to mock this ludicrous explanation and ask why the stoves never exploded when mothers-in-law were cooking... yet, this was the usual defence proffered by the husband and it would be accepted by the courts.”

○ Uma Chakravarti

The anti-dowry movement triggered a burst of creativity as women took their anger into the streets, markets, colleges, workplaces, neighbourhoods and homes. Materials produced by campaigns against dowry murders in different parts of the country are part of the history of women's movements in India. There are thousands of songs and posters; street plays like *Om Swaha*, translated into almost every Indian language and the inspiration for the feminist theatre movement; photographs that stand as political statements (like the iconic image of a silver-haired woman, Satyarani Chaddha, sitting on the steps of the Supreme Court with her murdered daughter's graduation photograph, sari and academic degrees); pamphlets and articles, and heartbreaking personal narratives – documentation of every moment of passion, protest and resistance in the movement.



Om Swaha opens a Pandora's Box

"When the play was performed in residential colonies, there was usually an immediate connection and empathy. Many people reacted as if the play was presenting their reality, reflecting it back at them. At a south Delhi performance, parents of various girls began relating their stories. In Mukherjee Nagar, north Delhi, residents started talking about what was going on in their homes and in the neighbourhood. In Sujan Singh Park, an upscale neighbourhood in central Delhi, very few residents came out but bystanders (mostly domestic help, drivers and guards) stopped to see the play, and began sharing some of their problems.

Renuka Mishra realised that the play filled a critical gap: "Strangers would begin talking to us, opening up issues they never spoke about to anyone else. I think there was no feeling of community in the city, and people missed it. We filled that vacuum without consciously intending to. We provided people with a sense of community."

Gouri recalls being overwhelmed by the response to Om Swaha: "We'd do a show, and people would relate personal stories to us, about how their daughter was suffering, or a relative or neighbour, and appeal for help. They needed help and support."

Deepti Priya Mehrotra (2025) "Walking Out, Speaking Up: [Feminist Street Theatre in India](#)"

The primary focus of the movement was on ensuring that the husband and the marital family were held accountable and punished for dowry deaths. [Changes in the dowry law](#) made dowry-related death within seven years of marriage to be a cognisable and non-bailable offence, with the husband and his family liable to life imprisonment if found guilty. The movement also succeeded in getting the government to set up implementation mechanisms including special police stations, family courts, counselling centres and women's helpdesks in police stations.

But the irony was that all these mechanisms were activated only after the woman died. There was no recourse for them when they were still alive, either from natal families or the state. Shelters for battered women were not a priority for Indian women's movements at the time, and so women had no choice but to live in their affinal homes till they learnt to resist or till death took them.

"Why must we wait for a woman to die before we start calling for justice? We need to give her justice when she is alive!"

○ Indira Jaising on the Domestic Violence Act

Despite the power of the movement, despite steps to make the dowry prohibition law more and more stringent, despite filing case after case – the stoves kept exploding and women kept burning to death while husbands and in-laws got away scot free. As the numbers grew, the long-standing demand for a law to protect women from domestic violence began to gather force once again.

The Protection Of Women From Domestic Violence Act, 2005

The movement against dowry murders in the 1980s led to the introduction of two new laws in the Indian Penal Code: Section 498 A and Section 304 B which brought physical and mental violence from the husband and in-laws under the purview of criminal law. Although these provisions were broad and included a wide range of violence, the police and courts continued to take cognisance of domestic violence only if it was related to dowry demands.

As a result, if an affected woman was unable to prove that the violence inflicted on her was because of dowry demands, her complaint was not given any credence. This also led to the woman's family members linking all violence to dowry demands – which could not always be proven correct. On the one hand, women were accused of registering false cases, and on the other, they were unable to prove the existence of other forms of domestic violence that were widespread as well as socially sanctioned.

Women's groups thus felt the need for a law on domestic violence that recognised all forms of violence within the home, which would provide legal as well as social recognition for the seriousness of domestic violence.

In 1991, the Lawyers Collective drafted a model Bill on Domestic Violence. The objective of the draft was to give legal recognition to domestic violence; create a framework for redressal and relief from such violence and establish women's right to matrimonial property. The National Commission for

Women in 1994 came up with its own Bill (based largely on the Lawyers Collective Bill) and submitted it to the government.

This was the first time that in addition to criminal provisions, civil remedies were proposed for relief from domestic violence. The definition of “domestic violence” was broad, and included harassment, forced sex, mental torture and acts against a woman's dignity in addition to cruelty. The draft legislation provided for an affected woman to approach the court for a protection order, that would prevent the husband and in-laws from continuing the violence, and would allow a woman to continue to live with her children in her matrimonial home. Alternatively, the order could also be used to get the court, husband or his relatives to provide financial support to the woman to enable her to live separately.

The draft Bill lay with the government and gathered dust for several years, while discussions among women's groups continued, along with advocacy and campaigning to build public opinion on the subject.

In 1999, another draft of the Bill was put forth by Lawyers Collective. Recognising the urgency of meeting the immediate needs of women survivors, a detailed set of civil remedies was proposed. The Bill provided women with protection against being thrown out of the matrimonial home empty-handed. It also extended the ambit of protection beyond wives and daughters-in-law, to sisters, daughters, mothers and widows. The earlier definition of “matrimonial home” was widened to “shared household” so as to include live-in and non-marital relationships within the ambit of the law.

The draft Bill required the government to appoint a “protection officer” in every district/ward who would be tasked with implementing the “protection order”, ensuring medical help and providing all necessary support to the woman. The draft also included a provision for government or non-government support institutions to be accredited as providers of services to women survivors of domestic violence. In case of violation of the “protection order”,

criminal proceedings could be instituted.

The Domestic Violence (Prevention) Bill that was finally proposed by the government in 2001 was not even a pale shadow of the draft Bill submitted by women's movements. It not only reflected a regressive and patriarchal mindset, but also contained several dangerous provisions.

Once again, women's groups launched a nationwide advocacy campaign. Discussions, presentations and press conferences were held all over the country to share the critique of the government draft, and petitioned the Law Minister for a review. A national level meeting was held in 2002, where a detailed campaign strategy was agreed on.

After the general elections and the formation of a new government in 2005, a series of regional meetings were organised where women's groups discussed and reached a consensus on a final draft legislation based on the earlier drafts.

The Protection of Women From Domestic Violence Bill got cabinet approval on 23 June 2005 and was passed by Parliament on 22 August 2005.

○ [From Saheli](#)

Four decades after the movement against dowry murders, and 15 years after the Domestic Violence law came into force, the practice of dowry continues unabated, stoked by [competitive consumerism](#). According to the [latest data from the National Crime Records Bureau](#), 13,534 cases were registered in 2021 under the Dowry Prohibition Act in 2021 – a 25 percent increase over the previous year.

“By far the greatest challenge is to change the mindset of men in domestic relationships who continue to believe that a man's home is his castle. The inevitable backlash is upon us. We are told that women ‘misuse’ the law. Decoded, this means that women are actually using the law. When the disadvantaged use the law after centuries of exclusion from the legal system, they are charged with “misusing” the law, as there was never meant to be a law for them at all.”

○ [Indira Jaising](#)

A few of these cases are horrifying enough to be picked up by the media – like that of the [three sisters in Rajasthan who killed themselves](#) and their children to escape dowry torture. For many of us, this is an eerie replay of the [tragedy in Kanpur in 1988](#), when three sisters hanged themselves to save their father from dowry demands. Many more such tragedies go under the radar and are never prosecuted. Courts continue to display their class, caste and gender biases and prioritise “Indian culture” over the law and Constitutional rights.

Some have argued that the state's willingness to bring in new laws in response to the movements of the 1980s and 1990s have more to do with deflecting [public outrage](#) and anger on the streets, than with advancing and protecting women's rights in marriage. The “[over-criminalisation](#)” of [traditional practices](#) (such as the impractical limits set on expenditure and gifts) are mere window-dressing since they are impossible to implement without compulsory registration of marriage. The government too continues to [indirectly promote dowry](#) by encouraging parents to invest in savings schemes that offer a lump-sum pay-out when a daughter reaches the age of 18.

Nearly 20 Indian women die every day as a result of harassment over dowry.



The movements of the 1980s and 90s brought domestic violence out of the shadows, getting it recognised as a violation of women's fundamental rights and making it a cognisable offence. While celebrating these victories, feminists groups recognise the need to change the terrain of engagement from the courts to the everyday social spaces where young people form opinions on issues that matter to them at a very personal level.

Perhaps we need to focus once again on surfacing the connections between the home and the dynamics of class, caste and patriarchy in the India of today – a very different place from what it was forty years ago.

Judicial pronouncements on domestic violence

Delhi High Court, 1983

"Introduction of Constitutional Law in the home is most inappropriate. It is like introducing a bull in a china shop ... In the privacy of the home and married life neither Art 21 nor Art 14 have any place."

Maharashtra High Court, 2008

"Every case of cruelty does not amount to an offence. It is only when harassment is committed to coerce a woman to commit suicide or meet an unlawful demand that it would amount to cruelty."

Law Commission, 2007

"The offence of dowry death is not the same as murder.... unless a direct connection can be drawn between the husband and the death."



Queer feminism: Exposing the violence of hetero-patriarchy

In 1998, the film “Fire”, a lesbian love story, broke the public silence around compulsory heteronormativity and the violence unleashed upon women who sought to escape that cage. The film caused a literal fire-storm in India’s aggressively patriarchal and heteronormative society.

Mobs of men affiliated to Hindu right-wing organisations hit the streets to uphold the sacred values of Indian society by storming and vandalising theatres, burning posters, attacking audiences and demanding that the film be banned. Unable to deal with the mayhem, many theatres withdrew the film, even as women's groups went head-to-head against the moral police outside theatres.

Feminists, free-speech activists, intellectuals and a few film personalities mounted a spirited defence of the film. In 2002, the iconic actor Dilip Kumar joined the director Deepa Mehta to file a writ petition under Article 32 of the Constitution (Freedom of Speech) in the Supreme Court. The film was ultimately cleared for screening without any cuts.

One consequence of the furore around the film was that the quiet conversations among women's groups in the metropolitan cities on the need to acknowledge multiple ways of being and loving, became more public and visible.

The global coordinated response to the AIDS crisis saw the emergence of organisations of sex workers and LGBTQ people, who were speaking out in public about their experiences. The growing concern for the extreme vulnerability of these groups to sexual violence gave strength to the demand for decriminalisation of homosexuality, with support and solidarity from women's groups and feminist organisations.

Stories of horrifying violence inflicted by parents on their sexually non-conforming children began to emerge from the cracks in family histories. Research on suicides of lesbian couples exposed the deeply rooted homophobia in "progressive" Kerala and West Bengal, and brought debates on sexuality into the political arena in these two states.



“An active choice of sexuality in the case of queer people and the dissonance that trans people feel with their bodies makes it possible to state once again that while the body does not determine us ... it is a vital aspect of our being.

The possibilities of skewing the alignment between gender and the body adds a nuance to our feminism. It allows for a more creative and playful relationship with the body. It frees gender identity from bodily restraints, allowing them to be lived with the imagined body as well.

Each of us, irrespective of gender should be able to find legitimacy through the idea that we do not just inhabit our physical body, we also live in the imagination of it.”

○ from Chayanika Shah et al, No Outlaws In This Gender Galaxy

Queer feminists are challenging and complicating our feminism, deepening our understanding of gender, the body, sexuality, intersectionality and post-colonial theory. They have spoken out on transphobia in mainstream feminist spaces, as well as intimate partner violence in queer relationships.

Queer and trans feminists have led from the front in the legal struggle to decriminalise homosexual relationships between consenting adults, for equal rights in marriage, for horizontal reservations for transpersons and for a ban on “conversion therapy”. In the course of these journeys, queer feminists have challenged us to acknowledge and respect the specific positioning and identities of all those involved, bridging and healing historical fractures and enriching the theory and practice of Indian feminisms.

The constructed “naturalness” of a world made up of two sexes, two genders, and heterosexual desire as the only legitimate desire has been continuously questioned and challenged by queer feminists, who have been marginalised by these norms. Narratives and stories shared by gender queer people have unpacked how gender is constructed and performed in different social, political and cultural contexts. The feminist critique of the Transgender Rights Act by queer groups demonstrates the shortcomings of laws and policies that are oblivious to this grounded analysis.

In April 2023, the Supreme Court heard a bunch of petitions on queer marriage rights. Most of these petition invoked the Supreme Court judgement that decriminalised homosexuality, emphasised the Constitutional guarantee of equal citizenship and asserted that the Constitution would have no meaning if sexual and gender minorities are forced to live in fear.

For instance, the petition filed by queer activist [Rituparna Bora](#) details how [violence and the fear of violence stalks queer couples](#) who live together without the legal protection of marriage. Going beyond a demand for marriage equality, the petition urged the court to re-imagine the concept of “family” beyond ties of blood or marriage, with the legal right to choose one’s own family and kinship.

“The collective experience of petitioners are illustrative of the range of interference and multiple violations by natal families LGBTQI individuals face and suffer everyday across the country which is further aggravated due to non-recognition of their relationships under marriage laws. Individuals are often compelled to sever ties with their natal families for survival and self preservation. Yet they continue to live under precarious circumstances and under constant vigil against real and imminent dangers of surveillance at the instance of natal families and the police. The force of prejudice and violence at the instance of families and extra judicial attempts at separating the couples can be mitigated if they can exercise the fundamental right to marry.”

○ [from the petition by Rituparna Borah](#)

The [government opposed all the petitions](#) on the grounds that “the Indian concept” of marriage applies only to heterosexual relationships.

In October 2023, [the Court ruled](#) that there is no fundamental right to marry and therefore, marriage between queer persons cannot be read into the existing legal frameworks for marriage. As expected, [right-wing groups welcomed the ruling](#).

Despite being disappointed by the verdict and alarmed by its [implications for queer relationships](#), the petitioners and activists from the queer movement are determined to [continue the struggle for legal rights](#). They point to the positive aspects of the judgement: the acknowledgement that queer people face discrimination and violence, and are in need of protection.

Along with struggles on the streets and in the courts, there is also the ongoing struggle to get people to engage with queer discourses and look critically at their own beliefs and ideas about gender, sexual identity and sexual behaviour.

● A radical proposal for “normalising queerness”

“I see way too many people around me struggling to label their sexuality because they worry they are ‘not queer enough’, ‘not always straight’, or not ‘completely’ bisexual. I see them troubled over labels, arduously rejecting fluidity; the perceived liminality a burden rather than a liberating space of belonging. I believe this paradox of rejecting one’s identity, while simultaneously trying to figure it out, occurs due to a lack of an inclusive, all-encompassing term. And whether we like it or not, it is only human to make sense of our reality by labelling things. It provides a sense of stability in the same way language does. Therefore, if we must affix a label at all, linguistically, why not choose one that denotes a spectrum?”

“...it’s as radical a thought as it is obvious. Obvious because if sexuality is a spectrum then queerness comprises all sexualities. Heterosexuality isn’t the default — it’s a section of this spectrum. What better way to subvert heteronormativity than by actively ignoring its pompous existence?”

If the human condition is based on boxing our experiences, I’d rather create a bigger one. I can expand my limited box of perception. Assuming heterosexuality does not allow this. Queerness does.”

○ Assuming queerness: An implicit subversion of heteronormativity (Dipshikha Sinha (2021))



Violence at the margins of the nation

Violence is encoded into our history as a nation. The partition of the country at the dawn of independence saw what is probably the largest and bloodiest migration of all time. Millions of people crossed the newly-created border in both directions, leaving behind homes, possessions and families to face an uncertain future in an unfamiliar country.

In the moment of the birth of nations, administrative failure, or administrative collusion in the breakdown of 'law and order', and the perpetration of mass crimes of killing, sexual violence and looting, were simply regarded as the price for nationhood. Both were considered a kind of collateral damage that survivors had to accept as part of that price.

Indeed, this informal understanding also granted impunity to the perpetrators, sometimes formalised through a general amnesty to all perpetrators, or by officially proposing the 'noble' principle of letting bygones be bygones as a means of reconciliation and peace building... in the name of national reconstruction.

The culture of impunity was thus, albeit silently, put into place so that demands for judicial redress could not even be proposed. Justice was not on the agenda as governments undertook the more pressing task of rehabilitation.

○ Faultlines of History: The India Story (Chakravarti 2016)

There is a huge silence around the sexual violence faced by women of both communities during the Partition. Many of the protagonists have died without speaking out, others continue to endure their trauma in silence. Even the hope of justice is long dead, given the judicial silence on sexual violence as part of a genocidal project.

Amidst the silence of the judiciary and the historians, feminists have given voice to the stories of sexual violence, focusing on retrieval rather than on judicial redress.

The notion of contested borders is one that persists in our consciousness. Although the moment of hoisting the flag on 15 August 1947 is celebrated as the "birth of the nation", the truth is that the new nation was not birthed whole: its borders and boundaries were, and continue to be, zones of conflict and contestation.

Kashmir, a Muslim-majority principality with a Hindu ruler, and the North-East Frontier Agency (a colonial administrative unit) both had tenuous relationships with the rest of India but were swept into the Indian fold in ways that left lasting scars on the new republic. The most persistent and purulent of these scars is AFSPA, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958

On September 11, 1958 the Indian Government passed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, a law that gives the armed forces unfettered power and complete immunity in areas that are officially designated as "disturbed".

This draconian law, the first such legislation in post Independence India, was first promulgated by the British rulers of India in 1942 as part of their attempts to quell the freedom struggle. Despite this inglorious history, it has been kept alive in independent India by successive governments. Intended as a temporary measure, AFSPA has been continuously operative in several northeastern state since 1958. It was also invoked in Kashmir in 1990.

Under this law, armed forces in "disturbed" areas have the license to shoot to kill anyone whom they consider to be disrupting "law or order", make arrests without warrants, enter and search any home or establishment, detain and question anyone. Both the Armed forces personnel and the government have complete immunity for actions taken under this law. Military personnel are protected from prosecution, investigation or any other legal proceedings under section 4 of the Act. Nor is the government's judgment on declaring an area "disturbed" subject to judicial review.

There is a long history of struggle against the AFSPA by ordinary people in all the areas where the Act has been imposed; women have spearheaded many of these struggles, especially in Manipur.

These struggles were given a new momentum when [Irom Sharmila Chanu](#), quietly began a fast in protest against the AFSPA which made her an iconic symbol of non-violent resistance in India and across the world.

In the nearly 16 years that have passed since the [Malom massacre](#), there have been [thousands of similar atrocities](#). In Manipur alone, thousands of civilians have been killed since 1980, many of them shot in cold blood in full public view for “acting suspicious” or “looking like a militant”. Human rights groups have documented thousands of cases of abduction and torture of young men, violent deaths in custody and execution-style shootings of captured militants in staged encounters. The chronicle of violence against women under AFSPA includes the mass rapes of more than 100 women in [Kunan Poshpora, Kashmir in 1991](#); the [abduction, rape, torture and murder of Thangjam Manorama](#) by a search party of soldiers in Manipur in 2004; the [abduction, rape and murder of two young women in Shopian, Kashmir in 2004](#); the [sexual assaults and rapes of women in Karbi Anglong, Assam in 2015](#).

Not a single soldier has been brought to book for any of these incidents even though the AFSPA does not explicitly indemnify rapes. The ordinary woman citizen is simply denied judicial remedy in an ordinary court of law. The Justice Verma Committee’s recommendation that rapes and sexual violence against women in AFSPA areas should be prosecutable in the courts has been ignored by the Government of India.

AFSPA has been repeatedly challenged in the Supreme Court. The legislature in Kashmir has voted against it. In the northeastern state of Tripura, the council of ministers has decided that it should be withdrawn. Experience has shown that AFSPA has proved to be an ineffective weapon against separatism and militancy, turning civilian populations against the government and undermining the search for political solutions. The UN Commission on Human Rights has repeatedly urged the Government of India to strike down AFSPA, emphasising that it has no place in a



democracy. Other UN bodies have pointed out that it violates India's obligations under international law. An expert committee recommended its immediate repeal, noting that it had become "a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and high-handedness"; the report was suppressed by the government.

In July 2016, in a landmark decision on a petition from the families of civilians killed by the armed forces in Manipur, the Supreme Court of India ordered a probe into 1528 cases of false encounters documented by the petitioners. The judgement is a clear indictment of the government's actions in keeping AFSPA in force for more than 40 years, characterising it as a failure of governance. The judgement is unequivocal in rejecting the claim that impunity for violence is a necessary strategy in combating insurgency, holding that "democracy would be in grave danger if armed forces were permitted to kill citizens on mere allegation or suspicion that they are "enemies of the state". A Special Investigation Team constituted in 2017 to look into each of the cited cases has still not submitted a report. The petitioners are still waiting for justice. Once again, the Supreme Court has cracked the whip but to little effect.

Meanwhile, AFSPA continues in force over large areas of the North-East. In a recent incident in Nagaland, a group of army commandos shot and killed a group of 14 young civilians in a botched operation. A special investigation team set up by the State government has chargesheeted the soldiers, but the Ministry of Defence has refused permission for prosecution.

Women across the country have come on to the streets hundreds of times to demand justice for those who have been assaulted, raped and murdered in states where AFSPA is in force.

One such flashpoint was the mass rape by army men in the village of Kunan Poshpora in Kashmir in 1991. More than two decades later, despite several enquiries and numerous court

orders, the state continues to undermine calls for justice by denying that the atrocity ever took place, attempting to overwrite women's experience with a counter-narrative steeped in misogyny and majoritarian prejudice.

Kunan Poshpora: Resisting erasure

On the night of 23 February 1991, a 125-man-strong patrol of the Fourth Rajputana Rifles moved into the twin villages of Kunan and Poshpora in Kupwara district for cordon and search operations. The men of the village were herded into two barns and a house being used as interrogation centres, while the women and children remained in their wooden dwellings.

According to the police documents, men of the village accused Army personnel of torturing them during interrogations. One man said he was forced to drink the icy waters from a chashma (natural spring). Another was forced to put his hands into the frozen snow. One man complained of being hung upside down and having chilli powder rubbed into his genitals. Medico-legal reports mention burn marks on a man's penis, suggesting electric shocks had been administered.

The next morning, when the men were allowed to return home, they learnt that many of the women had been subjected to brutal sexual assaults by the troops, many of whom were drunk. The soldiers moved off in the morning after obtaining a mandatory no objection certificate signed by an inhabitant of the village who had accompanied the troops.

A letter of complaint was sent by the villagers to police and Deputy Commissioner (DyC) of Kupwara. On 5 March, the DC visited the village and conducted an official inquiry. In a letter dated 6 March to the police and divisional commissioner, he wrote that the army men "behaved like beasts", and that he felt "ashamed to put in black and white what kind of atrocities and magnitude was brought to my notice on the spot".

He was given empty liquor bottles left behind by the soldiers that, he says, he handed over to the police. This letter became the basis of an FIR filed with the police on 8 March 1991.

Shortly after sending this letter, the DyC was transferred. However, his letter was leaked to the media and brought national and international attention to the remote village.

The media glare resulted in a fact-finding initiative by human-rights activists and journalists led by Justice Farooqi a former Chief Justice of the Kashmir High Court. This time, 53 women accused the Army personnel of raping them.

On 18 March 1991, the head of the civil authority, Wajahat Habibullah, Divisional Commissioner (DC) of Kashmir, visited the snowbound villages where he was met by women who repeated the charges of rape and molestation. In his book 'My Kashmir: The Dying of the Light', Habibullah ambivalently claims that he found the villagers' complaints "exaggerated but not necessarily unfounded", and noted that a more detailed inquiry was necessary. Habibullah added that when the J & K state government published his report, it deleted his expressions of misgiving. More recently, Habibullah has accused security forces of attempting to bury the incident.

At this critical juncture, when everyone who had visited the villages was calling for further investigation, the Indian Army sought an 'impartial' verdict from the Press Council of India. This enquiry commission was led by senior journalist BG Verghese and two other journalists, one of whom did not make the trip to Kashmir at all.

The Verghese Committee report exonerated the army completely based on three problematic assumptions: first, that the incident was not reported to the police immediately; second that medical evidence does not substantiate rape; and third, that the women did not use the word "rape" in their testimonies. The report was critiqued in devastating detail by a feminist journalist who had been following the case from the start.



In 2004, the survivors approached the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) which took suo motu cognisance of the case. In 2011, the SHRC ruled that compensation must be provided. The SHRC, which can only make recommendations, also passed strictures against the authorities for their “callous, negligent, insensitive and indifferent” behaviour. Most importantly, it called for a reinvestigation into the crime.

In April 2013, a group of women activists approached the Kashmir High Court with a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) demanding a fresh probe into the mass rapes. During the hearing, it emerged that the police report of October 1991 declaring the case “unfit for launching criminal prosecution”, had not been submitted to the sessions court. Technically therefore, the case was not closed, and was sent back to the sessions court in Kupwara.

In June 2013, the judicial magistrate of Kupwara’s session court examined the police report which was brought into the light after 22 years, and found sufficient facts and circumstances to “put the suspects [125 Army personnel] on trial”. The report substantiated the villagers’ narrative and contains 19 statements from survivors, materials seized as evidence including torn clothes, 32 medico-legal reports and crime-scene maps.

In response, the Indian Army filed a revision petition in November 2013 claiming that opening fresh investigations was akin to “flogging a dead horse” and citing the Verghese report to claim that the case was a “pre-planned, politically motivated game against the army”. This plea was dismissed by the Sessions court, which ruled that “crime never dies.”

In 2014, there was a significant breakthrough. In its order on a petition filed by the survivors, the High Court recognised the responsibility of the state for the crimes committed, citing the state’s statutory and constitutional obligations. The High Court observed that the SHRC recommendations for relief were evidence-based, and instructed the government to look at providing compensation within three weeks.

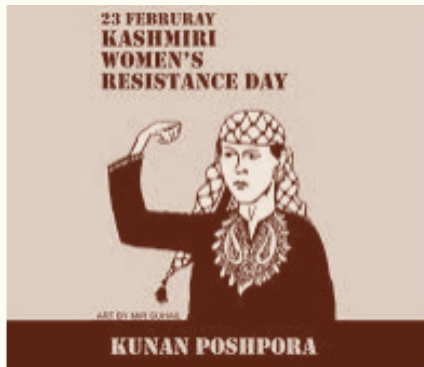
The State government and the Army challenged this order in the Supreme Court, claiming that the rapes are a hoax orchestrated by militant groups to discredit the security forces and undermine counter insurgency operations. The Supreme Court put a stay on the case in 2015, which has not been vacated to date.

Today, 32 years after the rapes, the case remains in limbo. Six of the survivors and some witnesses have died. There have been seismic changes in the political situation with the revocation of the autonomy awarded to Kashmir at Independence. The elected legislature has been superseded and Kashmir has been downgraded from a state to a Union Territory under the direct control of the Central Government. This decision was enforced with a hugely increased military presence, wholesale arrests of political leaders and incarceration of ordinary citizens under draconian laws.

In such a situation, it would not be surprising if the issue of Kunan Poshpora faded from public view and sank into oblivion. Instead, a new generation of feminists are countering the ongoing attempts at erasure by retrieving memories and foregrounding the voices of the survivors.

In 2012, when the rape and murder of a young medical student in Delhi galvanised a protest movement that rocked the country, a group of young women decided to re-open the Kunan-Poshpora case and connect with the survivors.

The book they wrote together, “Do you remember Kunan Poshpora?” stands as a powerful refutation of the official narrative. Through personal accounts of the survivors’ journeys, the book examines questions of justice, the responsibility of the state and the long-term impact of trauma.



Uma was a member of a fact-finding team that went to Kashmir to investigate a case of rape and murder of two women. She shares her memories of an overwhelming and heart-wrenching experience.

I never made it to Kashmir when I was young or even as a young teacher, as a tourist, The Dal lake, the Mughal Gardens, the slopes of Gulmarg – I saw them only in Bollywood movies But in my fifties I went – In 2001 when there was supposed to be a ceasefire.

But there was not.

Many people, including women, had been killed when they came out to demonstrate.

Thinking it was safe for them to do so in the ceasefire...

As we stood waiting for our taxi in Lal Chowk
Two little boys came up to us and asked “Tourists?”
As we shook our heads to say no they shot back:
“Human rights?”

It was that normal, the violations
And the occasional investigations...

Who is the guardian tonight of the Gates of
Paradise?

Wrote Agha Shahid Ali,
And this one
From windows we hear
Grieving mothers

A young girl told me she desperately wanted to be
a doctor,

But she also said, यहां डॉक्टर बनने के हालात नहीं हैं
 (“The conditions are not right for me to become
a doctor”)

हालात कब होंगे? (“When will they be right?”)

I asked her

She looked me squarely in the eyes and said जब तुम
हालात बनाओगे (“When you make them right”)

At the other end of the country from Kashmir, the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in Manipur is another illustration of the way in which the state uses the rhetoric of national security to destroy the credibility and deny the humanity of those they choose to target.

Rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama, Manipur 2004

Late in the night of 10 July 2004, about seven or eight uniformed personnel from the Assam Rifles, accompanied by two men in civilian dress, forcibly entered the house of Thangjam Manorama Devi while the family was watching TV. One of the soldiers held Manorama's brother at gunpoint, while others searched the house.

Terrified by the commotion, Manorama ran to her mother and hugged her. At this, one of the men caught hold of Manorama and started dragging her outside. Manorama was crying and begging them to stop. She was dragged to the veranda outside, where the soldiers stripped and beat her. The family was ordered to switch off the light in the veranda, but her brother kept watching through the window as the army men poured water on Manorama and kept asking her to answer their questions while she wept and repeated that she didn't know anything. Manorama was then gagged and brought inside the house clutching her ripped clothes. Her face was swollen and bruised. The soldiers told her to get dressed in fresh clothes, then "arrested" her and dragged her off. Her body was found the next morning, on the side of the road about three kilometres away from her house, riddled with bullet wounds. Her genitalia had also been shredded with bullets.

The Army's version of Manorama's death is very different. They claim that Manorama was a member of the separatist insurgent group the People's Liberation Army, and claim that the arrest was legally warranted. They claim that Manorama tried to escape while being taken into custody and was shot in the back as she ran, resulting in her death.

Manorama's death would have become just another instance in the long list of army excesses, if not for the protests that exploded across the State. The protests were led by the Meira Paibi (the torch-bearers), an organisation of "Ima" (mothers) who had mobilised to prevent and protest arbitrary arrests of young people by the Army.

Five days after Manorama's murder, in an unprecedented show of embodied power, a group of 12 mothers stripped naked and stood in front of the army headquarters holding a banner saying "Indian Army, Rape Us", shocking and shaming the guards into retreat, and shouting their defiance even when they were arrested and marched away by police.

This extraordinary protest – a symbolic reclaiming of the bodies of uncounted Manipuri women violated by the Army – shocked and shook the country and catapulted the case to international attention.

The State government of Manipur instituted a judicial inquiry headed by a highly respected retired High Court judge. The Army made several attempts to derail the process, refusing to send anyone to testify before the Commission. The Assam Rifles filed a writ petition before the High Court, challenging the decision of the state government to set up a commission without the approval of the federal government. Ultimately, the court ruled in favor of the Army and directed that the report of the Commission be sent to the federal government for further action.

The report of the Inquiry Commission was finally placed before the Supreme Court in 2014, a decade after Manorama's murder. Although the report was not made public, lawyers representing Manorama's family were given access to the depositions and evidence.



The autopsy reports, the submission of the police surgeon and the findings of the Central Forensic Science Laboratory report are unequivocal – Manorama was tortured, raped and murdered. There were no spent bullets or bloodstains where the body was found, indicating that the body had been moved away from the site of the killing. The trajectory of the bullet wounds suggested that she had been shot while lying on the ground. Most of the wounds were in the front of the body and not on the back as they would have been if she was shot while running away. There were semen stains on Manorama's garments. Bullets had been fired directly into the vagina in an apparent attempt to destroy evidence of rape.

There were also several procedural violations that the Army neither denied or explained. For instance, there was no FIR against Manorama when she was arrested and taken away by the Assam Rifles. Permission for the arrest had not been sought from the concerned Superintendent of Police. There was no woman police constable in the arrest party and Manorama was not produced at the nearest police station after the arrest.

The report of the Inquiry Commission is now available online, even though the government has officially buried it. AFSPA has been withdrawn from the Imphal valley where the State capital is located. The Army has moved its headquarters away from the Kangla Fort, the site of the protest. But no action has been taken against the members of the patrol that kidnapped and killed Manorama.

Nearly 20 years after her murder, the Imas and Manorama's family are still waiting for justice.

“The spectacular and radical act of protesting nude in broad daylight gives a completely new meaning to agency, and even if momentarily, redefines the politics of resistance within a field over-determined by social, political, and ideological constructions of normative femininity.”

○ Political motherhood and a spectacular resistance: (Re) examining the Kangla Fort Protest, Manipur (Ray, 2018)

Women’s movements recognised and celebrated the Meira Paibi’s action as a powerful reclamation of agency and resistance. The women acted entirely on their own, without consulting other organisations in the network and without informing their families of their plans. The warning message intended in the act of leaving Manorama’s broken and violated body lying on the road was overwritten by the Imas who turned their naked bodies into instruments of defiance and power.

Footage from the protest shows an enraged Ima (Nganbi, now in her 80s) shouting “We are all Manorama’s mothers! Rape us, kill us!” in English because it is “a language the world and the Army would understand”. Looking back 17 years later, Ima Anandi, the one who first broached the idea of a naked protest, says “What is the point of wearing clothes when we aren’t treated with dignity?” Ima Nganbi echoes her. “I am wearing clothes only in name. My protest is still as naked as it was that day.”

No less dramatic than the Ima’s protest is Irom Sharmila Chanu’s 16-year long fast in protest against AFSPA.

Irom Sharmila’s 16-year long satyagraha

Sharmila began her fast on 2 November 2000, the day that ten unarmed people waiting for a bus in Malom, a small town in Manipur, were gunned down by a paramilitary patrol on the rampage after a bomb blast near their camp earlier that day. The victims – who included a 60 year old woman and three teenagers – had nothing to do with the blast: they were ordinary citizens going about their daily lives.

An explosion of shock and outrage engulfed Manipur in the aftermath of the Malom massacre. Irom Sharmila Chanu, a 28-year old poet and human rights activist, in her own words “an ordinary woman”, acted with extraordinary personal and political courage: she resolved not to eat or drink until AFSPA was struck down. She started a sit-in at the site of the massacre and was soon joined by hundreds of young people.

Three days after starting her fast, Sharmila was arrested, charged with “attempted suicide” and remanded to judicial custody. Thus began 16 years of incarceration and force-feeding through a tube inserted permanently into her nose.

Confined to a small room, she lived cut off from her family and supporters: anyone wanting to meet her had to submit a written request a month in advance along with a “security deposit” amounting to more than three times the monthly income of the average Indian. Because the maximum penalty for attempted suicide is a jail term of one year, Sharmila was forced to go through a farcical process of release and re-arrest each year.

Sharmila’s fast was a non-violent protest in emulation of Gandhi’s “satyagraha” and resonated with feminist movements across the world. An international campaign in her support #Stand with Irom Sharmila was endorsed by thousands of feminist activists. She was honoured with many international awards and was acknowledged as a Prisoner of Conscience.



In July 2016, Sharmila announced that she would end her fast. In an emotional statement, she shared her anguish at the government's refusal to acknowledge her fast as a political act, instead trivialising it as a crime. She announced that she would enter the arena of mainstream politics, and laid out her vision of a political system based on equality, respect and non-violence, irrespective of the ideology of those in power. She founded the Manipur's Peoples' Resurgence and Justice Alliance (PRJA) in 2016 and contested the 2017 Assembly elections. She got only 90 votes.

On the day the election result was announced, Sharmila declared that she would never stand for elections again. Deeply wounded by the angry reactions of her erstwhile supporters who saw her decision to end her fast as a "betrayal", Sharmila left Manipur and moved to Bangalore. She has not returned to Manipur since.



Sharmila's poignant reflections on her decision to end her fast and free herself from her forced isolation also leaves feminists and women's movements with some uncomfortable questions: What does it take to give one's life to a cause? How much can a movement demand of its icons? Does an activist have a right to relinquish the struggle and return to being "an ordinary woman"? Or must her life be determined by the expectations and aspirations of her supporters?

Sharmila may have left the political arena, but her simple question still demands an answer:

How can a country that prides itself on being the world's largest democracy continue to implement a law that violates every tenet of democracy?





Seven years after Sharmila quit politics, Manipur is in flames once again. This time, the conflict stems from long-standing tensions around land and natural resources between the majority Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo community, an ethnic minority.

Manipur: Burning in the Dark

Violent clashes broke out on 3 May 2023 during a solidarity march by the minority Kuki-Zo ethnic group in ten of the state's sixteen districts. The Meitei organised counter-protests and blockades and the violence quickly engulfed the State. In these four months, more than 300 people have been killed, and thousands have been injured. More than 60,000 people have been displaced, and 12,000 people have fled to the neighbouring state of Mizoram. Every day sees reports of fresh clashes, lynchings, rapes and displacement – the latest being the forcible externment of the last 24 Kukis remaining in the capital city Imphal. Meanwhile, the government remains unmoved, unresponsive and unaccountable.

On May 4, the Indian government did what it has done time and time again when faced with internal conflict - shut off the internet so that the scale and brutality of the violence remained hidden from public scrutiny. As usual again, the government justified this step in the name of internal security. The information blackout was broken only in July, when a 26-second video was posted on Twitter. The video showed two Kuki women, being stripped and paraded naked by a mob of young men who are hitting, groping and manhandling them.

The video created a furore. The national media descended on Manipur, identified and interviewed the two women who had been gang raped while the police stood by and watched. These were only two of the hundreds of instances of sexual violence, rape and murder that have now come to light.

The media reports, first-person accounts and video evidence forced the government to acknowledge the conflict, and respond with vague and generalised statements of “anguish” laced

with whataboutery. The Chief Minister of Manipur has admitted that there have been thousands of rapes, without any visible signs of accountability or assurance of action against the perpetrators. Although the faces of several members of the mob are clearly visible in the video, only four men have been arrested thus far - that too, after pressure from the media and opposition politicians.

“Shooting the messenger” is the official response. Citizens and reporters who have exposed the violence have been charged with defaming the state. Fact-finding teams from women’s organisations and the Editors Guild have been tagged as “anti-nationals” and charged with criminal conspiracy, incitement to violence and disseminating fake news. In both cases, the Supreme Court stepped in to protect them from arrest.

Meanwhile, the right-wing media and majoritarian WhatsApp warriors have gone into action to defame the survivors as illegal immigrants, drug traffickers and foreign agents. Trolls have spread fake stories of Meitei women being raped and tortured, and called on Meitei men to take revenge. Opposition leaders who are demanding accountability from the government have been viciously trolled and attacked in Parliament.

The refusal of the Prime Minister to intervene personally to stop the violence has been deplored even by his supporters. UN bodies, the European Parliament and the international media have condemned the government’s inaction and refusal to discuss the issue. Protests and demonstrations by Kuki women’s organisations and women activists have been closely policed and regulated.

For feminists and women’s rights groups, it has been painful to see local groups of Meira Paibis, the famous “torchbearing mothers” of Manipur, participating in the conflict. Meira Paibi, an informal grassroots mobilisation of Meitei women, have a long history of opposing state violence and state repression, culminating in the “naked protest” against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. A loose informal network, the Meira Paibi is held together by a keen sense

of justice and defiance against oppression. This shared political consciousness has been their driving force. Yet today, they stand accused of participating in the violence against Kuki women. Feminists who have met and spoken with women from both communities have confirmed that “lines were crossed” but also cautioned against easy generalisations.

Twenty months, three Parliament sessions and a general election later, Manipur is still burning. The violence is no longer front page news but the number of those dead and missing continues to rise. Despite government claims of rehabilitation, thousands of people are struggling to survive in makeshift camps, where they are vulnerable to attacks both by armed groups and by security forces. Women in camps in Kuki-Zo areas face horrific conditions. Food, water and medicines are in short supply as NGO relief teams are blocked by armed groups patrolling the borders between communities. Although the government has announced an aid package, even people from the majority community say they have seen little of it.

Satellite images show the extent of the devastation – entire villages have been reduced to rubble and trees have grown in places where houses once stood. There are signs of a backlash against the armed forces with villagers protesting against the curbs on free movement and disruption of normal activities.

It is not only geographical location that determines marginality. Despite the Constitutional commitment to secularism and equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, caste and religion, Indian Muslims have always been among the most deprived

and marginalised groups in the country. According to the Sachar Committee report of 2006, they hover close to the bottom of almost all development indices in most states.

Two decades later, when majoritarianism runs wild in social and political spaces, Indian Muslims struggle to negotiate the daily reality of othering, stigmatisation and vulnerability to violence. Their religion, dress, language, and practices are mocked, attacked and shamed. They are expected to adhere to majoritarian practices. They can be lynched for eating beef, for not chanting “Jai Shri Ram”, for being in the vicinity of a Hindu temple or simply for “looking like a Muslim”.

The 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat was the first warning flag that the majoritarian agenda could go beyond exclusion and erasure to physical annihilation of Muslims. Official figures of 1,044 deaths are contested by independent groups. The Concerned Citizens Tribunal estimated that as many as 1,926 may have been killed, the majority of whom were Muslims. Hundreds of rapes and sexual assault were reported.

Uma remembers Bilkis and her struggle

“In August 2002, almost six months after the violence in Gujarat, I went to Ahmedabad as part of a fact finding team of the People’s Union of Democratic Rights (PUDR). This was the second of two visits that led to a report highlighting the nature and consequences of the violence.

I was taken by some women doing relief work to meet Bilkis Bano at a small shelter they had set up for her and her husband. Bilkis – 21 years old and five months pregnant - sat silent, her eyes glazed as the relief workers told us her story - the fourteen killings she witnessed as the mob fell upon her extended family of women and children, the killing and raping that followed and worst of all, the sight of her three year old daughter being hurled to the ground and smashed to death. Bilkis herself had been gang-raped and had witnessed the rapes and deaths of others in her group of seventeen women, men and children as they fled from the carnage in their village. Apart from two small children, Bilkis was the only survivor of the bloody massacre, saved only because she was unconscious and the killers presumed her to be dead. She spent a day and night hiding in a cave in the hills. When she finally gathered the courage to come out, she covered herself with a blood-soaked skirt and somehow made her way to a police station. It was the police who then took her to the relief camp, where her husband found her.

Then began Bilkis’ struggle for justice, reliving her trauma yet standing firm as the sole witness of the massacre and the atrocities that she and other women had been subjected to. Bilkis had named her assailants in her complaint to the police, but the police did not write down the names. In fact, the police colluded with the murderers, bringing salt to fill the mass grave so as to hasten the process of decomposition. Bilkis was under constant pressure not only from the rapists and the police, but from other survivors of the massacre who were told that they could not return to the village unless the rape charges were dropped. Bilkis stuck to her story and persisted with her case. Predictably, the Gujarat Police dismissed her complaint after a perfunctory pretense of investigation.

It was the quiet and steady support from a small group of committed feminists and activists from inside and outside Gujarat that gave Bilkis the strength to keep up the fight. She approached the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Supreme Court to seek a re-investigation.

The Supreme Court granted her plea and directed the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to take over the investigation. A team of experts exhumed the remains of the victims from a mass grave and confirmed the rapes and murders. The victims were identified even though the bodies were badly decomposed and the heads had been severed.

In January 2008, eleven men were sentenced to life imprisonment for rapes and murders and a policeman was convicted of falsifying evidence. In May 2017, the Bombay High Court upheld the sentences. Seven police officers and doctors of a government hospital were convicted for suppressing and tampering with evidence. In April 2019, more than 17 years after the rape, the Supreme Court ordered the Gujarat government to pay Bilkis an exemplary amount as compensation for her suffering, a tacit acknowledgement of the failure of the state to ensure her safety.”

Even as Bilkis became an icon for others, she herself remained scarred with wounds that the law cannot heal. She is tormented by memories of her murdered daughter, but did not seek death penalty for the murderers. “I don’t want revenge, I just want them to understand what they have done” she said at the time.

Bilkis’ case was only one of the hundreds of mass atrocities perpetrated against Muslims during that fortnight of terror. As reports of terrible atrocities against women - of a scale and brutality unseen since the Partition - began to leak out into the media, there was an unprecedented upsurge of concern and support across the country. Women’s groups worked in relief camps, interviewing survivors and preparing meticulous records of each case. Civil society activists set up support groups to follow up on the criminal cases filed in the courts to get justice for the survivors.

Fact-finding exercises were initiated by democratic rights groups, feminist activists, lawyers, administrators, professionals and media persons.

Documentary film-makers worked on the ground to record survivors’ accounts and highlight the vicious narrative that sparked the violence. Activists and journalists risked their lives to expose the back-stories that were being systematically erased from the official records. In an undercover sting operation, reporters from an investigative website interviewed some of the leaders of the mob, who gave detailed accounts of how the carnage was planned and implemented. International human rights groups investigated and documented reports of state complicity.

Feminist groups made critical interventions in the campaign for justice for survivors of sexual violence. Indian feminists took the issue to the international arena, lobbying with members of the CEDAW Committee to raise questions on India’s sanitised official report to the Committee on the Status of Women, forcing the government to acknowledge the scale of the violence. A team of feminist activists went to relief camps in violence-affected areas and spoke to survivors and their communities, who described the extreme brutalities that they had witnessed and suffered. “Survivors Speak”, the report of this fact-finding, documents these “meta-narratives of bestiality”.

“We have been shaken and numbed by the scale and brutality of the violence that is still continuing in Gujarat.

Despite reading news reports, we were unprepared for what we saw and heard; for fear in the eyes and anguish in the words of ordinary women whose basic human right to live a life of dignity has been snatched away from them.”

○ Survivors Speak (2002)

In another powerful expression of feminist solidarity, an international team of women jurists, activists, lawyers, academics and experts came together to organise an International Tribunal to bring attention

to the ongoing impacts of the violence on the lives of Muslim women. Each of the women on the panel came with her own history of resistance: from Nazi terror to strife in Israel and Palestine, terrorism by Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria, war crimes in Bosnia, ethnic chauvinism and armed conflict in Sri Lanka, India's partition and the public killings of Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Even these seasoned veterans were shocked and shaken by the details of the brutalities endured by the women who deposed before them.

The [report of the tribunal](#) brought the lens of international law to bear on the situation, and highlighted the way in which sexual violence was integral to the majoritarian project. The testimonies heard by the tribunal provided further evidence that the violence was not a spontaneous outburst but a pre-planned pogrom against Muslims.

Between them, these feminist investigations broadened the understanding of community responses to sexual violence beyond the notion of silence in defence of community "honour" as described in [feminist writing on the Partition](#). The hundreds of testimonies and stories from women whose rape and abuse had been a public spectacle made notions of "silence" and "honour" completely irrelevant. [Women and their families were speaking openly](#) about how the police and government officials watched and even participated in the brutality. The refusal of survivors to file police complaints was not a signal of "silence as honour", but a conscious refusal to engage with a system that they knew was in league with their violators, and was designed to annihilate them.

The Tribunal was the starting point of a continuing struggle to get legal acknowledgement of [targeted sexual violence in situations of communal conflict](#) as a specific offence. Although efforts to bring in a comprehensive legislation on communal violence have been [repeatedly blocked](#), rape during communal or sectarian violence has been recognised as an offence under Section 376(2)g of the Penal Code (IPC 2013) and attracts a life sentence.

The first conviction under Section 376(2)g was awarded by a district court in May 2023, to two men for gang rape of a Muslim woman during communal riots in Muzaffarnagar in 2013. The survivor showed exceptional courage and resolve in facing down threats, intimidation and harassment throughout her ten years of struggle, during which six of the original petitioners dropped out of the case. The survivor's lawyer had to petition the Supreme Court to act against the delaying tactics by the accused and the prosecution, and order a speedy trial.

In the last decade, the ongoing [battle between two diametrically opposed ideas of India](#) has accelerated and hardened the polarisation of social and political spaces and discourses. There is a steady rise in incidents of [majoritarian violence](#) and [hate crimes](#).

A [range of silencing strategies](#) are being deployed against Muslims who voice their claims to equality, justice and rights. The list is long and growing longer - [blaming Muslims for Covid](#), to creating [strawman conspiracy theories](#) such as [love jihad](#), [empowering vigilante "cow protection squads" to attack and lynch Muslims](#), [demolishing the homes of Muslims](#) who participate in protests, and [criminalising Muslims because they are Muslims](#). Ordinary Muslims feel [insecure and alienated](#).

Despite the speed and audacity of these roll-back on rights, none of us was prepared for the [release from prison of the convicts in the Bilkis Bano case](#). These men, convicted of multiple rapes and murders during the [pogrom against Muslims](#) in Gujarat in 2002, have been released for ["good behaviour"](#), despite objections from the investigating agencies and the sentencing judge.

The news of the convicts being released destroyed the fragile sense of security that Bilkis had built up over the last twenty years. The released men were hailed as heroes and welcomed with public fanfare and were seen openly threatening Bilkis and her family.

“How can justice for any woman end like this? I trusted the highest courts in our land. I trusted the system, and I was learning slowly to live with my trauma. The release of these convicts has taken away my peace and shaken my faith in justice. My sorrow and my wavering faith is not for myself alone but for every woman who is struggling for justice in courts.”

○ Bilkis Bano

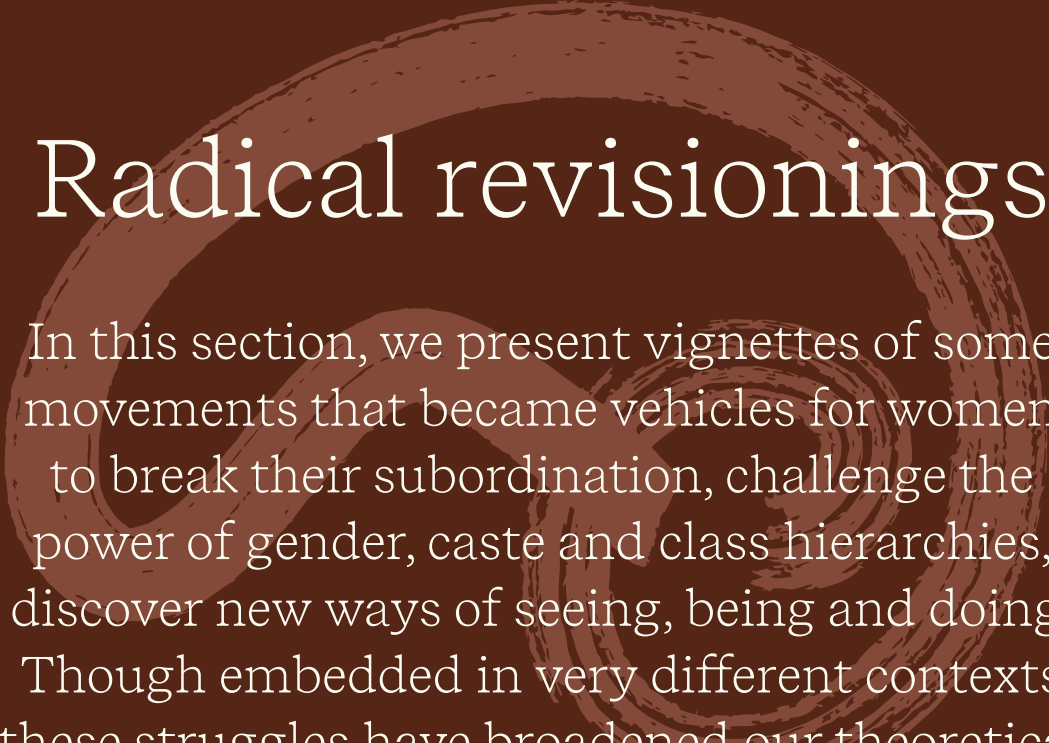
Bilkis’ appeal to the Supreme Court was summarily dismissed, leading to a huge public outcry. In January 2024, the Supreme Court, responding to a set of public interest petitions, quashed the remission and sent the convicted men back to prison.

Bilkis’ case was only one of the hundreds of mass atrocities perpetrated against Muslims during that fortnight of terror in 2002. As far as the other cases from 2002 are concerned, there is not much to celebrate. Even as the petition challenging the release of the convicts in Bilkis’ case was being heard in the Supreme Court, many other cases relating to the Gujarat carnage were being erased from history. In April 2023, a special court in Gujarat acquitted all 67 accused in the Naroda Gam case, where 11 people were burnt alive by a mob allegedly instigated by a woman Minister and a leader of a Hindu right-wing outfit.

High-profile convicts in the Gujarat cases have spent almost as much time on parole as in prison. The 11 convicts in the Bilkis case spent an average of 1000 days on parole, furlough or temporary bail. One of them, who clocked 1576 days out of jail, was charged with harassment, intimidation and breach of peace while out on parole. Former Minister Maya Kodnani, convicted to 26 years in the Naroda Patiya case, was photographed at various public events while out on parole on health grounds. She was finally acquitted of all charges by the Gujarat High Court in 2018.

In the Gulberg Society case, 11 men were sentenced to life for the murder of Ehsan Jafri, a Member of Parliament who was hacked with swords and burned alive with other Muslims who had taken shelter in his house. The sentence came in 2016, 13 years after the event, and that too at the intervention of the Supreme Court. In 2022, a bench of the Supreme Court dismissed a case filed by Zakia Jafri, the wife of Ehsan Jafri, seeking to hold the state accountable for her husband’s death. The judgement contained some harsh words for Teesta Setalvad, a respected social activist and co-petitioner in the case, that she deserved to be in the dock for pursuing “ulterior designs”. Within a day of this judgement, Ms. Setalvad was arrested by the Gujarat Anti-Terrorism squad and charged with conspiring to implicate government functionaries in the Gujarat carnage. The Gujarat High Court twice denied her bail. It took another bench of the Supreme Court to grant her bail.

Radical revisionings



In this section, we present vignettes of some movements that became vehicles for women to break their subordination, challenge the power of gender, caste and class hierarchies, discover new ways of seeing, being and doing. Though embedded in very different contexts these struggles have broadened our theoretical understanding of how women's involvement in larger social movements can expand agency despite the unyielding violence of patriarchies.

● Bodhgaya: Dalit women re-imagine relations of production

Bodhgaya in Bihar has been a sacred site for more than 2500 years. This is where the Buddha, seeking an end to the suffering that he saw all around him, exhausted from his wanderings, sat under a *bodhi* tree to meditate and attained enlightenment. The *bodhi* tree and the soil on which it stood became a hallowed spot for Buddhist pilgrims from many lands where Buddhism had become the established religion.

Ironically, even as Buddhism spread across South-East Asia, it was being overtaken by Hinduism in India. During the 1700s, a sect of Hindu monks established themselves in Bodhgaya. With support from powerful local elites, the Mahants (abbots) of the monastery gained control of the Buddhist site with its many temples and shrines clustered around the sacred *bodhi* tree. Over the centuries, they also took over more than 2000 acres of agricultural land. Thousands of Dalit and Bahujan families became *kamias* (bonded workers), toiling to produce the surplus which fed the coffers of the monastery and consolidated the power of the mahants.

“We were at Babaji’s mercy - we did whatever he asked us to do. Even the slightest sign of insubordination was dealt with firmly. You could not call in sick the *goraith* (overseer) would come and beat the pulp out of us and take us to the local *kachheri* to be disciplined further.”

Indulata Prasad (2021) “We have achieved great feats...but our struggle is far from over”

The brutal rule of the mahants continued unchallenged even after Independence. In order to escape the provisions of the Land Reforms Act of 1950 and the Land Ceiling Act of 1961, the mahants divided their lands into parcels and created religious trusts to hold them in perpetuity.

Women and men who lived through those times have given chilling accounts of the violence, humiliation and degradation inflicted on them by the mahants and their enforcers (*goraiths*). Sexual exploitation of women was pervasive.

The emergence of Maoist groups in the 1960s saw a wave of young Dalit men leaving their villages to join the armed struggle against the mahants, only to be disillusioned by the violence.

The struggle that finally broke the power of the math was spearheaded by the Chatra-Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, a youth movement inspired by the socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan in 1975. Vahini activists began mobilising peasants in Bodhgaya, with the slogan “*Jo zameen ko boye jote, voh zameen ka malik hai*” (“Those who



sow and plough the land are the owners”). Dalit peasants allied with Sangharsh Vahini staked claim to the 10,000 acres of surplus land of the Math.

Issues of gender and caste were made central to the struggle in both theory and practice. Vahini activists organised regular camps (*shivirs*) with women to talk about issues of rights and equality. Issues of women's exploitation within the household, the burden of care work, discrimination against girl children, domestic violence were discussed. The issue of land and women's need for land came up again and again in these meetings.

The *shivirs* became a strategy for women to challenge stereotypical practices. While women attended the camps, men were sent back to cook and look after the children. The camps were also transformative for middle-class activists, who challenged each other to acknowledge and surrender their own privileges. They dropped their caste surnames, renounced their religious affiliations, and supported inter-caste and inter-faith marriages.

In 1980, Dalit peasants forcibly occupied about 3,000 acres of land and began cultivating it. Despite beatings and attacks from the police and goons from the math, they managed to plough, sow and defend the crop until the harvest. Women bore the brunt of the attacks, but stood firm and harvested the crops.

“We were in the forefront of the fight, carrying our children in our wombs and in our arms. We went to jail and faced the lathis; we also did all the housework. But when the land was distributed, we were pushed back, we didn't even come to know by what rules the land was distributed.”

○ Manimala in Manushi 1983:15



Finally in 1981, the government identified 1000 acres of the land for distribution. A list was drawn up by Vahini activists who tried to give a higher priority to those at the bottom of the pile. Women were shocked to find that they did not figure in the list unless they were widows. They vehemently protested their exclusion and refused to back down in the face of the objections of husbands and community elders, officials and even men from the Vahini. Women countered every argument with a forceful logic that could not be overturned.

The men argued: “What difference does it make in whose name the land is registered?” The women responded: “If it doesn’t make a difference, then put it down in the woman’s name. Why argue about it?”

To the suggestion that women’s demand would weaken class unity, the women replied: “Equality can only strengthen, not weaken an organization, but if it does weaken our unity, that will mean that our real ommitment is not to equality or justice but to the transfer of power from the hands of one set of men to another.”

When the men asked: “How can you cultivate the land on your own? Who will plough it for you?” they replied: “Well, who will harvest your crop in that case? We are ready to cultivate the land with hoes instead of ploughs, but we want it in our names.”

As one woman said “If this landless man has the power to beat me, how much worse will it be if he gets land!

○ Manimala in Manushi, 1983

The debate went on for nearly three years. Finally, women wrested their right to be allocated land on equal terms, as individual title-holders. In a few cases, land was even given to unmarried daughters living in their parental homes – an important indicator of a fundamental transformation in the community’s perspective.

The Bodhgaya movement was the first land struggle where gender equality was an explicit objective, and the only one where a feminist praxis was consciously evolved and sustained, creating a new subjectivity among formerly subjugated and disenfranchised people.

Although much of the land distributed through the movement has once again gone into the hands of rich middlemen, most of the women have retained the land they fought so hard to gain.

The Bodhgaya land struggle is a unique example of how addressing women’s specific demands and needs do not necessitate an autonomous, separate or independent space; rather it calls for gendering the issues that the movement is struggling for. This allowed for collective exploration of how caste hegemony and patriarchy works through the subjugation and control over women’s bodies.

From Indulata Prasad (2021) “We have achieved great feats...but our struggle is far from over”

When I stand on my own land,
it feels like the whole sky is mine!

जब अपने ज़मीन पर खड़े
होते हैं तो लगता है की सारा
आसमान हमारा है!





● Koodankulam: Women fight for a future

The Koodankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP), has a long and troubled history. The project was floated in 1979, when the Soviet Union entered into a nuclear power deal with the Indian government to build two nuclear reactors in India. Mired in international criticism, the proposal did not move forward for more than 20 years. Construction finally began in September 2001.

The People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), a local organisation formed in 2001, began to raise objections to the project and its impact on the region. Protests had in fact begun much earlier. In 1989, thousands of demonstrators

marched against the project under the banner of the National Fish Workers Union, protesting a proposal for the nuclear plant to draw water from a nearby reservoir.



The fishing communities near Koodankulam fear that the nuclear plant will change the sea and the coast forever. The rich, fragile ecology of the Gulf of Mannar (on which a small port has been built to service the nuclear plant) would suffer disastrous consequences. Waste and hot water that would be ejected into the sea would threaten marine life, and devastate the fishing settlements on the coast. Many of these fears are coming true, although the official position is that the plant is “safe”.

Over time, the protestors have raised questions about a range of issues surrounding the Koodankulam project, from the unfair purchase agreements through which the authorities have allegedly acquired land for the plant, to promises of jobs for local people, which have never been fulfilled.

“The effluent is frothy, like soap water, steaming hot and brown like cowdung.....fish cannot survive in this. The fish we used to get within 10 kilometres, we now have to go 20-25 kilometres to catch it. Even the fish we do catch – we worry about the chemicals they have taken in from the waste. What will my children do for a living.”

○ A fisherman in Idithinkarai village

A shroud of secrecy surrounds everything to do with the plant – the state has never bothered to consult local communities and discuss their fears. Safety reports have not been made public. Information on costs and contracts are also kept secret on grounds of “national security”. Instead, local communities have been accused of having been duped by “anti-India foreigners” into speaking against the plant. Conspiracy theories and nationalist pride have stoked hostility towards the protestors. Hundreds of protesters have spent time in jail, hundreds have gone on hunger strike, and



thousands face charges such as sedition, ‘waging war against the state’, conspiracy and ‘rioting with deadly weapons’ for their peaceful opposition. These charges carry life sentences, and are still hanging over the heads of several thousand protestors.

For the women of the community, the Fukushima disaster was the trigger that convinced them of the need to put their bodies on the frontline.

They have continued their protests for decades now, refusing to respond to provocations, retaining their dignity and refusing to back off despite being attacked, imprisoned and prosecuted by successive governments. They are clear on why they are fighting and why they will never give up – they are fighting not for themselves but for their children’s future and the survival of their community.

“If nuclear power is really so safe, why don’t they put this reactor in front of the Parliament in Delhi?”

○ Women protestors in Koodankulam



Even as the protestors in Koodankulam were being hauled off to jail, residents of elite neighbourhoods in central Delhi mobilised to call for a halt to the erection of mobile phone towers in their area because of the fear of radiation. Their demand was promptly granted – they did not even have to go to court. The irony is inescapable.

So what are we to learn from this? That radiation affects skins in upper-class, upper-caste, posh Delhi areas more than the fishworkers on the southeastern tip of this country?”

Prajnya K (2013). Inside the Republic of Koodankulam

“I have lived a slave’s life, a woman slave’s life. What is my freedom? I will live for another 10, 20 years. After that also this will continue, because we did not resist.

I heard radiation causes cancer, it will affect even the foetus in the womb. I started thinking: Why do we marry? We think a child will be born, our line will continue. Why not just have sex with whoever you like and be done? Why all these rituals, marriage ceremonies, if we have to make our children deformed? Why live at all?”

(Sundari, Koodamkulam protestor, speaking to Uma Chakravarti)

Tweet from an anti-nuclear activist.

“This is Xaviaramma, from Idindhakarai. A great anti-nuclear activist. She is not a scholar in nuclear science. She is a woman from the fisherfolk community. But she knows that the Koodamkulam nuclear plant will be an end to their livelihood, that their sea will be polluted, that their air will be polluted, that it will be a danger to humankind... so she is fighting against it.... As of my knowledge, she is being arrested by police today while protesting. But I know, she won’t give up..... ”

● Women in Print: Writing new worlds into being

The first International Feminist Book Fair (IFBF) held in London in 1984 brought together hundreds of women – authors, academics, reviewers, critics, media people, publishers and women readers – and celebrated the confidence, strength and audacity of the women's movement.

Over the next decade, Feminist Book Fairs became the visible face of the 'women in print' movement that, in alliance with women's movements and women's studies movements, provided the rich substrate for the growth of feminist publishing across the world.

"I will never forget the sheer ebullience of the First International Feminist Book Fair in London in 1984. Feminist writers and publishers from all over the world gathered to celebrate not only the power of the word, but also the solidarity of women in print. Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Alifa Rifat, Barbara Smith, Ellen Kuzwayo, Gert Brandenberg, Suniti Namjoshi and Madhu Kishwar — the whole surge and potential of the international women's movement, it seemed, was there for all to see at Covent Garden, producing the knowledge and providing the perspective that would transform the world."

○ Ritu Menon (2012) A Feminist's War With Words



Ritu Menon, co-founder with Urvashi Butalia of Kali For Women, India's first feminist publishing house, points out that feminist publishing has everywhere and always emerged from women's movements. When, after years of experience in mainstream publishing and academia, Urvashi and Ritu decided to launch Kali in 1984, their friends in publishing thought they were taking a huge risk. "Where will you find the writers and readers?" they were asked.

The first generation of Kali's books were all commissioned in response to issues and concerns being raised by movements. Often, this involved persuading, cajoling and nagging reluctant activists to write.

Urvashi recalls 'trapping' Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari in her flat, babysitting Kumkum's little son while they knuckled down and wrote the much-delayed introduction to Recasting Women.

As activists themselves, they knew that women's struggles and campaigns were producing impressive amounts of materials - first-hand information and data contained in handbills, pamphlets, reports, newsletters, petitions, posters, songs, stories, plays, submissions – the ephemera of women's movements that, if organised, analysed and presented from a feminist perspective, could be visible evidence of an alternative body of knowledge.

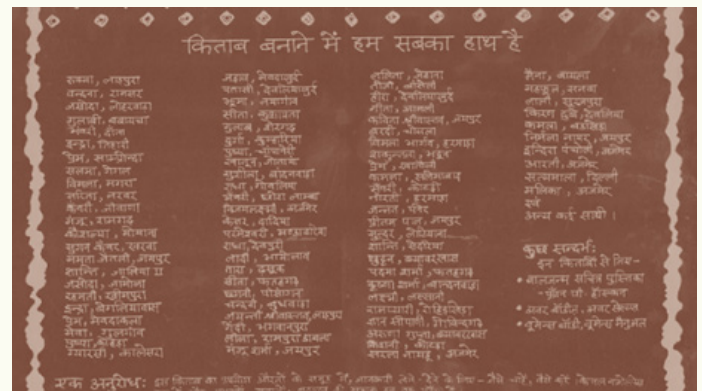
With the women's movement as their community and their constituency, Kali set out to become a platform for women's writings, from fiction and memoirs to feminist tracts, academic texts and movement chronicles.

Within the first ten years, this ambitious dream was more than fulfilled. Kali's iconic logo - created by feminist artist and dancer Chandralekha - looked out from the shelves of mainstream bookstores. Truth Tales, a collection of stories by women, translated from six languages; Radha Kumar's The History of Doing, a chronicle of the women's movements with its stunning collection of iconic images; Vandana Shiva's Staying Alive, a founding text of feminist ecology; Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, edited by Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari, an English translation of Qurratulain Hyder's Aag Ka Darya ('River of Fire') – all these are still in print and are standard reading for feminists and students of gender studies and post-colonial feminist studies in South Asia and beyond.

“Every book we do is political. Every book we do is special. Every book we do is to be celebrated.”

○ Urvashi Butalia

Those early publications are memorable for their visual impact as much as for their pathbreaking content. None more so than Sharir Ki Jankari, a Hindi book that, according to Urvashi, is the most important book Kali ever published.



Shareer ki Jankari (“Know Your Body”) was published by Kali for Women in 1989. It was a book that most publishers would refuse to touch – a book produced by village women with a bare minimum of literacy, with graphic illustrations and unfiltered “adult content”, aimed at rural women in the poorest parts of the country.

Shareer Ki Jankari was conceptualised by a rural collective of women in Rajasthan who had learnt about the female body, sex and reproductive health and wanted to share this knowledge with others in their village. They came to Kali with a handmade book with their own drawings of the anatomy of the female body and explaining menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause and reproductive health.

The authors had already field-tested their creation by showing it to a few others in the village who were the potential users. These reviewers were dubious about the drawings of naked bodies which they felt would not be accepted – after all, naked women were not seen walking the village streets. The authors devised an ingenious workaround: the reworked illustrations depicted women dressed as they were in daily life, but with flaps that could be lifted up to reveal the naked bodies under the clothes. A unique and brilliant solution, devised by women who had only minimal schooling and would not even be recognised as readers, far less creators, by mainstream publishers.

Excited though Kali was about the book, getting it into print was not easy. The women insisted that all 75 of them would have to be named as authors on the cover of the book. This time, it was Kali that came up with a creative solution – a cover that opened out into a panel long enough for all 75 names. Then, the press where Kali books were printed refused to take on this one because, according to the owner, the boys who worked there were “getting excited” by the illustrations. It was finally printed in a press run by women, who were unfazed by the pictures.

Even though 70,000 copies of the book were printed, it has never appeared in bookshops. Every single copy was sold by the authors themselves, to women in rural areas. It has been translated and reprinted in several languages.

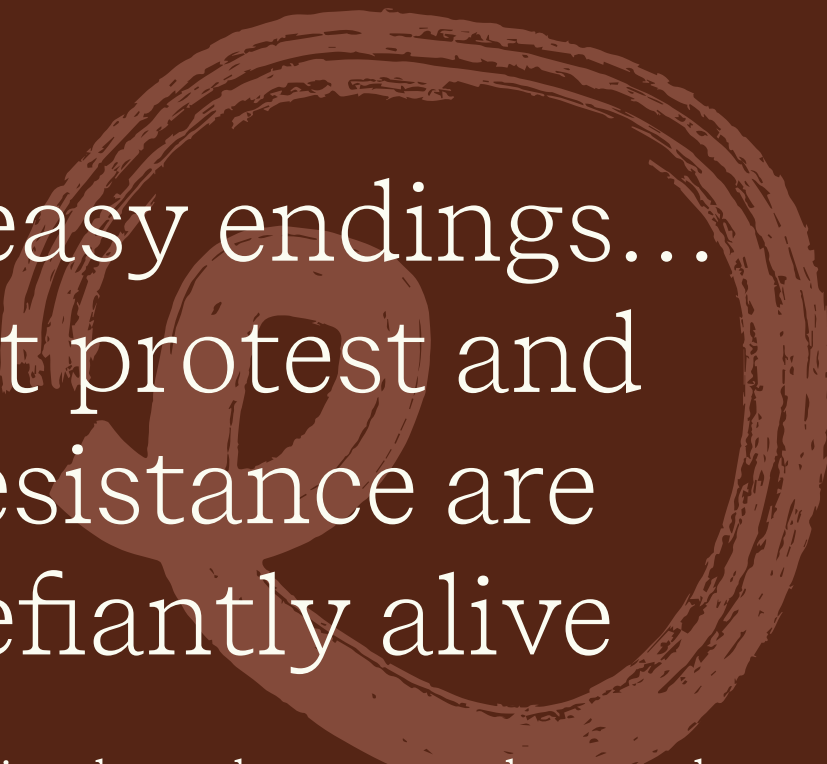
Shareer Ki Jankari still stands as a landmark of feminist publishing. In translating women's embodied experience onto the printed page without distortion or dilution of its political intent, it challenged the conventions and expanded the possibilities of print culture not just for feminists but for writing and publishing as a whole.

“If I had been part of a larger publishing house, I would never have been able to initiate the series I called Arabesque. It is not economically viable, but it is a literary, political and personal commitment... We are going to publish a book of testimonies by Palestinian women prisoners in Israel prisons. It is an act of bearing witness to the struggles of people who have been under occupation for over 50 years.”

○ [Ritu Menon \(2021\)](#)

In the years following, we have seen the emergence of other women's presses and feminist publishing houses. The Kali founders parted ways in 2003 and set up independent imprints, [Zubaan](#) and [Women Unlimited](#), both with expansive catalogues covering academic works, fiction, non-fiction and feminist tracts. Women Unlimited has brought a range of feminist and progressive writing from West Asia to Indian readers. Zubaan has given a platform to young feminist writers especially from the North Eastern states. [Stree-Samya](#) have published academic works on contemporary gender issues, caste and culture and identity as well as fiction in English and Bengali. [Tara Books](#) aims at “pushing the boundaries of the book form in an age that is writing its obituary”. [Tulika](#) publishes picture books for children in many Indian languages, reflecting an inclusive, non-discriminatory and non-violent sensibility. [Yoda Press](#) focuses on queer-affirmative and feminist writing on a range of issues.

There have been some dramatic changes. Women's writing is no longer the preserve of women's presses – big-name publishing houses are now competing with independent publishers to publish books by and for women. Reading and writing have both gone digital, changing the very notion of a book. Multinationals with deep pockets and aggressive marketing strategies have entered the Indian market, edging out small bookshops and independent presses. But feminist publishers, despite their lean budgets and tiny operating margins, are still holding the space for a new generation of readers and writers to dive into feminist politics, producing the knowledge and developing the perspectives for an alternative world of equality, justice and peace.



No easy endings...
but protest and
resistance are
defiantly alive

This project has taken us on a long and enriching journey of remembering and reflection. Much has changed in the last four years, and there have been many moments when we found our excitement and energy draining away in the face of the turmoil and violence around us.



For feminists who have been part of the struggles described in the previous pages, this is a moment of deep despair. It is devastating to see the way in which the hard-won gains of the past are being reversed one by one – not under the radar but in the full public glare, each move hailed as a step towards making India a country of, by and for Hindus.

There is no longer any ambiguity about the fact that this vision has little if any space for non-Hindus. The “othering” and demonisation of minority communities and the cold-blooded incitement of hatred and violence against them seems to have accelerated and engulfed the whole country in the last few years.

It stalks our streets and neighbourhoods. It has entered our schools and our places of worship. It reveals itself in the police and law enforcement agencies. It has been fueled and amplified by TV channels. And yet, this hate and violence appear to be of little concern to a large number of Indians, who repeat the incitements that circulate on social media to justify their contempt.

We have laws against hate speech, but they have been weaponised to suppress and silence the victims and exonerate the perpetrators. The space for the expression of contrary opinions and dissenting views is shrinking, even as whataboutery has replaced reasoned argument in the political discourse.

If, despite this dismal scenario, we are still hopeful of change, it is because diverse voices are speaking out in anguish and protest against these egregious outbursts of hate and violence.

Despite being individually and collectively targeted by punitive action under draconian laws, civil society groups continue to assert their democratic rights in domestic and international spaces.

Feminist activists who have been targeted with false cases are turning the tables and proudly owning the epithet of “troublemaker” thrown at them by the state. Artists, writers, film makers and scientists are taking stands against the politics of hate, refusing or returning awards given by the state. A handful of mainstream newspapers and

independent media continue to stand their ground, often at great personal risk. Artists and writers are drawing on histories of subversion and resistance, reaching new audiences, exposing the complicity of the film industry in disseminating majoritarian versions of history, and showing up the hollowness of majoritarian binaries. As always, humour and satire are being deployed to great effect by feminist performance artists and political satirists. Young activists are reclaiming “boots on the street” as their strategy of choice.

A new generation of feminists - students, activist lawyers, journalists, academics, workers, community organisers, human rights defenders and concerned citizens - has moved into the frontlines of resistance.

One of the most powerful women's movements against violence in recent years was launched not by feminist activists, but by working-class Muslim women.

Women's protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, an exclusionary proposal for identifying and penalising “non-citizens”, started in Shaheen Bagh in Delhi and became a symbol of dissent and resistance until the state forcibly shut it down during the lockdown.

Shaheen Bagh: Muslim women reclaim the Constitution

On 12 December 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed by Parliament. It provides for the grant of Indian citizenship to those Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians who migrated from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan on or before December 31, 2014. The Act attracted wide opposition for omitting Muslims from the list of communities considered for the grant of Indian citizenship.

Three days later, the police entered the campus of the Jamia Milia University and brutally attacked the students. Bamboo staves, stun guns and tear gas were used. Students sitting with their books in the library were mercilessly thrashed.

In response, women from the nearby locality of Shaheen Bagh, many of whose children were studying in Jamia, came out of their homes and sat down on the road. Within weeks, the numbers grew. The 200 or so local women who had started the protest were the unmoving core, but during the day and especially in the evenings, the numbers swelled. Thousands of women from across the city and from other states – students, journalists, human rights activists, women from other working-class areas, middle-class professionals, citizens concerned about the majoritarian turn in politics and public life – all congregated in the tent.

Most of the protestors were working-class Muslim women, many wore a hijab or burqa and were accompanied by their infants. They took turns running back home to cook, to wash dishes and clothes, send their children to school. They brought their prayer-mats to the tent and prayed together. But these stereotypes were belied by their emergence on the public stage as self-aware and powerful activists at a time of crisis for their communities. They spoke not as victims but as advocates of justice outraged by the unjust actions of the government, reciting the preamble to the Constitution as an invocation of their claims as citizens.



At the height of the protest, the Dadis of Shaheen Bagh – octogenarian women who had become the faces of the protest – were invited by a TV channel to speak to a wider audience. Unfazed by being on live TV, they explained their stand and reeled off the names of seven generations of their ancestors. The message was clear: they belonged here, were born here and lived here, and did not need any papers to prove their claim to being Indian.



The protest space became an arena of creativity. The podium was managed by young women students, who politely prevented any politicians from taking the floor. Instead, people who had travelled from other parts of the country were invited to the stage to speak of their own experiences and share messages of solidarity from their members. Scholars, writers, poets, musicians, theatre people came to perform or just to sit in a corner of the tent and soak in the energy and passion of the gathering.

Women used the social and cultural resources at their command to turn their dharna into a safe and inclusive space. Men were not allowed inside the tent, but were quietly supportive, looking after children and taking on household chores. Local shopkeepers organised tea and biscuits for all comers. A group of Sikhs came and set up a community kitchen to cook hot meals for the protestors. Even the policemen posted at the site were invited to share the food.

There was no death of right-wing trolls and politicians who could not stomach the sight of hitherto invisible Muslim women coming out on the streets and demanding their rights. The protesting women were vilified as tools for “anti-Indian” human rights groups, fronts for their criminal menfolk and “bodies for hire” who were put up by opponents of the regime. Fake images were circulated to claim that they were defacing Hindu religious symbols. A Hindutva influencer disguised in a hijab tried to infiltrate the protests, but was soon unmasked. On one occasion, a drunken gun-wielding attacker shouting a right-wing slogan (“India for Hindus”) tried to storm the tent but was quickly disarmed by local men and handed over to the police.

The Shaheen Bagh protest has been extensively and eloquently documented – in words, in photographs, images, and videos. Many have reflected on lessons for other movements in the way in which this spontaneous act of protest by a handful of women created a new vision of citizenship and a unique space of resistance in a divided city.

“A friend from far away writes to me to find out the names of the artists who have made the posters, installations and other artworks at Shaheen Bagh. I tell her that there are so many of them and yet no one person in particular. Everyone is doing something – painting, drawing, welding, writing, making. Whose idea, whose imagination, whose materials, whose labour, whose dissent has gone into what? What transformed construction debris into words, a Wikipedia page into a political banner, paper boats into hope, a road into a zone of care and freedom? The Delhi Police faced a similar dilemma when it wanted to speak to the ‘organisers’

of the protest – who are the leaders, who are not, who are the protestors, who are not, who are the supporters and who are the spectators. Where does the protest begin and where does it end? Does it begin from across the Yamuna in Delhi and end in Mumbra in Maharashtra? How many worlds does it create in its mimesis and alterity?”

○ Revisiting a Ground Report from Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh, (Sarovar Zaidi and Samprati Pani, Firstpost)

“The most striking feature is perhaps the peaceful nature of the protests. Women there are well-informed about what they want and they stick to it. Their fight is with the ideology of fascism, not with individuals. There is no hate speech directed against anyone, which is remarkable given the alienation people have been facing under the current regime. Women at Shaheen Bagh have transformed their anger into one of the most peaceful protests, making the site a cultural space for resistance...There is a huge crowd of people from other religious groups as well, who come in solidarity against the unconstitutional othering of Muslims. The stage is open to anyone who wants to express their views pertaining to the ongoing movement, provided no hatred or communal violence is instigated. The presence of a library, “Aazadi” chants

(which the fascists always confuse with sedition), and freedom of speech sans any provocation—Shaheen Bagh represents a functioning and vibrant democracy.”

○ [Love and Resistance in Shaheen Bagh](#)
Badiuzzaman Bay, The Daily Star, Bangladesh

“Shaheen Bagh and what it represents naturally invites comparison with earlier moments of mass mobilisation. It has neither the organisational backbone and media muscle of the Lokpal Movement (...) nor does it have the spontaneous rage of the crowds of mainly young people that had gathered to mourn and avenge Jyoti Singh, the young woman who had been brutally raped and murdered in Delhi in the winter of 2012. Unlike both these episodes, it is both more unpredictable and more measured.

What we are witnessing today is much less univocal, because it is untied to any single issue platforms like corruption or rape. It also refuses the representative logic that marked earlier political moments. There is a stage. But the stage is not where “leaders” sit. Symbolic as well as actual power—including the authority to decide who will and will not take the stage—remains amongst the throng of women and children who sit facing it.

That is why there is no leader, no high command, no central charter.

Instead, it is as if the enigmatic, elusive construct of citizenship, and the refusal to offer oneself up for identification to the state, enables and opens out a conversation over a whole spectrum of issues and questions; ranging from the freedom to be different, to the meaning of equality and fraternity. To be in Shaheen Bagh is to be constantly engaged in discussions about the difference, and relation, between subject and citizen. This is a conversation that is both more philosophical and concrete than anything else that has preceded it politically. It also sets the terms for the conversations that we will still be having, well into the future.”

○ [The Garden of Freedom](#)
Shudhhabrata Sengupta, The Caravan



Covid-19 came to India in 2020. On 25 March 2020, the government announced a draconian lockdown at just four hours notice. The women of Shaheen Bagh made rapid adjustments – only a few women would stay in the tent, at a sufficient distance from each other. There would be no gatherings or evening events. But none of this mattered when the police swept in and forcibly cleared the tent, pulling down the tent poles, breaking the stage, throwing out the rugs and mattresses and physically pushing the protesters out. By the next day, all the installations were dismantled, the posters and banners stripped down, the books torn and burnt and the graffiti whitewashed over.

As they left the protest site, the women of Shaheen Bagh left behind their slippers – a token of presence and a symbolic assertion of the continuity of resistance.

● Kerala: ASHA workers expose the violence of “care extractivism”

Twice as long and no less arduous than the Shaheen Bagh protest is the continuous sit-in before the State secretariat by ASHA workers in Kerala. Even though it has continued for more than 225 days at the time of writing, it remains largely invisible in the national media and does not seem to have made a mark on the public consciousness outside Kerala. Is it because the violent and noisy politics of communal polarisation has crowded out everything else from the media space? Or is it because the protestors are women from marginalised groups, and their protest not dramatic enough to capture and keep attention? Or is it because the issues being raised have unsettling implications for the established social order at every level from the family to the State?

The bedrock of India's social welfare programmes is the labour of millions of women. These women - workers and “helpers” under the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme), women cooks and “helpers” in the School Mid-day Meal programme, ASHA workers (Accredited Social Health Activists) in the National Rural Health Mission - are frontline workers in programmes directly linked to key development indicators.

It is hard to believe that, despite their critical role and contributions to national development, these women are not government employees but “community volunteers”. A committee set up in 1975 to suggest measures to tackle the rural health crisis recommended the creation of a cadre of community health workers to work on building health literacy, promoting preventive care and linking underserved populations with formal health services.

“We get called in to fill seats during programmes with ministers as guests” an ASHA worker said.

“We also get called in to organise yoga demonstrations, walks, and cookery shows. Our fellow workers have had to clean dead bodies for funerals. We have cleaned worm-infected wounds for patients. We have done it all but cannot do more of it without getting fair wages.” Another added, “Everyone calls ASHAs for all the work—be it block development officers, ward members, or police officers. They need us to always be available on call, but are unwilling to pay.”

from Ayana Krishna D, Shradhha Jain and Srimanjori Guha. Underpaid and Unheard: The struggle of Kerala's ASHA workers.

However, the recommendation came with the proviso that these workers should remain outside the formal health system, since becoming salaried employees would make them “bureaucrats” and alienate them from their communities. Instead, it was expected that these workers would build trust and acceptance through their personal commitment and social bonds.

This expectation is a classic example of care extractivism, supported on the one hand by the patriarchal view of care work as women's work, and a policy framework that commodifies care work and social reproduction, while maintaining a facade of welfare through interventions subsidised by the invisible, underpaid and unacknowledged labour of women.

Small wonder then that the lives of community care workers are defined by precarity, exhaustion and stress. Despite working long hours, they are paid an honorarium that is less than the minimum wage. They are not entitled to job security, social security or retirement benefits. Working conditions fall far short of minimum standards of safety, respect and dignity. There are no institutional mechanisms for raising or redressing grievances. Government officials treat ASHAs and ICDS workers as “all-purpose workers” who can be assigned any task over and above their duties which they are expected to fulfil no matter what. The [official task list](#) makes them responsible for practically all basic public health services at the village level (including “a minimum package of curative services”), with no mention of remuneration or entitlements.

It was the pandemic that forced acknowledgement of their role and established the public image of ASHA workers as frontline “Covid warriors”. Stories of the [courage and commitment of ASHA workers](#) who served as contact points between citizens and the state during the lockdown, went viral on social media. There was also [public outrage on the failure of the state](#) to provide basic necessities such as protective clothing, gloves and masks for ASHAs, many of whom worked without payment for months. The government remained unmoved.

ASHA workers have been internationally acknowledged as [central to Kerala’s much lauded response](#) to the Covid pandemic. Keeping to a [gruelling schedule](#) and covering 200+ families every day, they [went from door to door](#) checking on every family in their area, ensuring testing and contact tracking, delivering food and medicines to patients and isolating families, ensuring that pregnant women and people with other health issues got the medical care they needed, providing

elderly people with extra support, and collecting epidemiological data.

“We do all the legwork—house visits, monitoring quarantine, collecting data, coordinating between different departments. We never get a chance to switch off our phones. We are on-demand 24/7,” [said an ASHA worker in Kottayam district](#).

Along with a strong health system and local health infrastructure, this ultra-local approach with monitoring and support of every single household has been identified as the most important factor behind [Kerala’s success in containing the pandemic](#) and tempering its impacts.

As the pandemic retreated, it became clear that, apart from some [token concessions](#) and [flamboyant gestures](#) to mark their “solemn sacrifice”, the government had little of substance to offer the erstwhile Covid warriors. [ASHA workers were honoured with the WHO’s Global Health Leaders Award 2022](#) which recognised their leadership, contributions to global health, and commitment to regional health issues. But even this did not have any effect on the government’s refusal to discuss their demands.

Rejecting the empty valorisation of care work as selfless service (*seva*), [ASHAs, ICDS workers and mid-day meal workers from across the country](#) began unionising and [coming out on the streets to press their demands](#). In November 2022, several thousands of women joined [a massive rally in Delhi](#), demanding recognition as workers, fair wages and decent working conditions. The rally and the State-level protests that followed resulted in some concessions (such as the [raising of the retirement age from 60 to 62 with a gratuity of Rs150,000 in Andhra Pradesh](#)) but there is a continuing silence



on the central issue: recognition as full-time workers with all the rights and benefits that go with it.

It was in the backdrop of this protracted history of struggles that ASHA workers in Kerala, under the banner of their Union, started their sit-in on 10 February 2025, demanding a consolidated salary of Rs. 21,000 per month, the option of retirement at any age from 62 to 65 years, with a one-time payout of Rs 500,000 along with a modest pension and health insurance.

“There is a fine of Rs500 for missing ASHA meetings, Rs700 for missing panchayat meetings, Rs 500 for missing centre duty. We never get the Rs. 7,000,” said an indignant ASHA worker. “There is a fine if we forget to bring our diary to meetings or if there is a delay in giving data or reports. There is always a cut.” Further, they said that the honorarium is never on time and is delayed for as much as four to five months. This forces them to borrow money from others... It becomes almost impossible to continue without getting anything for months.”

○ Shradhha Jain et al (2025) Underpaid and Unheard: The struggle of Kerala's ASHA workers

Those who raise their eyebrows at the ASHA workers' expectation of a salary three times their present honorarium forget that what they earn now is less than half of the legal minimum wage. What they are asking for remains less than a decent living wage (calculated at Rs 34,170 by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance for unions of women garment workers). The ASHAs are not asking for compensation for a decade or more of underpayment. Nor are they asking to be compensated for the silent financial support they offer to women in need - paying for transport to take them to the hospital, bringing food for them when they are laid up in hospital, buying medicines for them. A recent study of ASHAs in Kerala finds that more than half of them are women from socially marginalised groups, sole earners for their families, struggling with loans and mortgages taken to meet essential expenses. Given the deductions for various petty errors, the full amount of Rs7000 is hardly ever paid out.

The workers have held their ground and continued their protest despite hostility from Left Unions, Left politicians and supporters of the ruling party. They have been harassed by police who tore down the tarpaulin sheet they put up to provide shelter from the monsoon rain. They have been mocked, shamed and dismissed by members of the ruling party as paid protestors acting on the orders of right-wing groups. Their act of shaving their heads on the 50th day of the protest has been belittled. One of their leaders has been likened to “a disease-spreading pest” by a senior leader. Counter-marches and strikes have been organised by ASHA workers allied to Left trade unions.

The irony of women workers trying and failing to get justice - or even a hearing - from the government in a Left-ruled state that prides itself on its record on equity and social justice, is too stark to ignore. Feminist movements across the country are standing in support of the struggle. Feminists and movement activists from across the country joined the protesters on Women's Day and affirmed their solidarity with their demands. Members of civil society and ordinary citizens have joined marches

and demonstrations in support of the protestors and their demands.

“Kerala’s vaunted model of ‘people-centred’ health collapses under the hypocrisy of relying on impoverished women to deliver essential services for a pittance...Every day the sit-in continues, the state’s credibility as a ‘global public-health exemplar’ erodes. (...)The longer that the government takes to recognize and meet the demands of the workers, the longer the women have to continue their protests, which will have far-reaching consequences. Missed antenatal visits, un-screened hypertension, and postponed mental-health referrals... will manifest as tomorrow’s spikes in maternal deaths, stroke admissions, and suicide attempts.”

○ From the [Open Letter to the Government of Kerala](#), ALIFA (All India Feminist Alliance)

“The ongoing protest by ASHA workers in Kerala is not just a call for higher wages—it is a battle for dignity, recognition, and fundamental labour rights. At its core, it is a feminist uprising against the systemic devaluation of care work, which remains overwhelmingly performed by women and persistently undercompensated.”

○ [Amal Chandra \(2025\) ASHA workers in Kerala demand dignity, rights and fair wages](#)



On its part, the Kerala government denies any accountability for meeting the demands on the grounds that the [central government is delaying the release of funds](#) for the scheme as part of their strategy to bring opposition-ruled states into line. Having now cleared the arrears of three months salary, relaxed the guidelines for payment of honoraria and given assurances of considering their other demands, the [government expects the protestors to end the strike](#).

[Onam has come and gone, and the hair they shaved off in March has grown back](#). The protestors, [who have kept their work going through these months](#), are clear: they are not going anywhere until they see some action on their demands.

“This is not politics – this is hunger. Our children can’t go to school on assurances. Our families can’t eat recommendations.”

○ S Mini, Vice-President KAHWA (Kerala Asha Health Workers’ Association)



● And a new wave of feminist action... Women wrestlers fight systemic sexual abuse in Indian sport

The sit-in and ongoing protest by women wrestlers is the longest public protest against sexual harassment, and the largest public protest by sportspersons, that India has ever seen.

In April 2024, Brij Bhushan Singh, a member of Parliament from the ruling party and former resident of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) was ordered to face trial in a complaint of sexual harassment filed against him by five women wrestlers.

The order came after more than a year of street protests by India's star wrestlers Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia. These elite athletes, all medal winners at the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games and international competitions, staged a sit-in at Jantar Mantar (Delhi's only officially approved protest spot) More than 30 women and men wrestlers and hundreds of supporters joined the protest.

Just three days later, the sit-in was called off after the government promised to set up a special committee to enquire into their complaints, and assured them that Singh would step aside until the investigation was completed.

“The complainants spoke to the Sport & Rights Alliance about the experience of testifying before the special committee. Those testifying told the Sport & Rights Alliance that supporters of Singh, including the media with cameramen, were waiting outside the venue on the days of their testimony. Athletes also told the Sport & Rights Alliance of their impressions of the committee’s response to their testimony against Singh. In interviews, they described the “skeptical” approach of the committee towards the allegations against Singh. For example, athletes told the Sport & Rights Alliance that the committee wanted to see video and audio “proof” of Singh’s abuse, not just testimony. One wrestler Sangeeta Phogat said “the committees were created with people who themselves did not know what sexual harassment is.” Another wrestler described her testimony of abuse as “not being heard...misunderstood and misinterpreted.”

○ From We Were Only Demanding Justice: Sexual Abuse in Indian Wrestling Federation

The protesting wrestlers came back to the streets in April 2023. Even though they were disappointed with the lack of consultation before setting up the committee, they had deposed before it and waited three months for the report. When the committee finally submitted its report, the government refused to make it public or share it with the complainants.

Throughout the protests (and to this day) the wrestlers were the targets of a concerted campaign by Singh and his supporters to take back their charges. Refusing to give in to threats, trolling, abuse and pressure from powerful individuals within the sports establishment, they announced that five women wrestlers, one of them a minor, had made a police complaint of sexual harassment. They also approached the Supreme Court to ask for a case to be filed on their complaint. They said that they had spoken to the Prime Minister and Sports Minister about the harassment in 2021 and had been assured of redressal, but there was no further action.

The extensive media coverage and public support for the protestors from other leading sportspersons, members of Opposition parties, farmers’ movement leaders and women’s groups opened the space for a flood of complaints against Singh, stretching back over his 12-year tenure at the head of the sport. The scope and scale of these revelations goes far beyond the acts listed in the complaint.

Under notice from the Supreme Court, the Delhi police finally registered two cases against Singh, but the protesting wrestlers decided to stay on the street until he was arrested. The campaign of threats and trolling intensified and became more vicious, backed up by an attempt by the police to evict them from the protest site.

Despite being asked to step down from his post, Singh, from the powerful Rajput caste and with clout as a vote-puller, managed to get one of his proteges appointed as the new head of the Wrestling Federation and continues to exercise control over the sport.



On 28 May, the day the Prime Minister inaugurated the new Parliament building, the wrestlers planned to march to Parliament accompanied by representatives of the farmers' movement and women's organisations. Instead, they were manhandled, dragged away and detained by the Delhi Police. Their supporters were prevented from joining them at the protest site, which was dismantled. The next day, cases were filed against them on various flimsy counts.



As in many other similar cases, the government chose to remain silent while allowing Singh to continue as if nothing had happened. The fact that Singh attended the inauguration of the new Parliament despite the grave charges against him proved to be the last straw. Ultimately, it was the massive media coverage and condemnation by international sports bodies that forced the government to take action and allow the cases against Singh to proceed.

Nine months later, the police has not even completed the recording of statements by the complainants and their witnesses. Singh has not been apprehended and continues in public life. In a recent statement, Singh accused female wrestlers of misusing laws designed to protect women.

Their protest has gone off the streets, but the women wrestlers have taken their action into the political arena. Vinesh Phogat competed in the Paris Olympics and defeated the reigning champion, but lost her chance at a silver medal on a technicality. She retired from the sport to fight and win a seat in the Assembly as a Congress candidate, and continues to face hounding and trolling by supporters of Singh. Undeterred by the long road ahead, the women say they are determined to continue the fight until they get justice.

“The story of the wrestlers’ protest is the real story of how Indian democracy trickles down to women. As the police investigation gets underway, what hangs in the balance is not just the future of the protesting wrestlers but the fate of India’s 692 million women—more than all other minorities combined. If they were to coalesce, they would blow every other vote bank out of the water.

Despite everything, the BJP might win a third term, and Singh, his seventh tenure and none of it would matter in the long run. Terms and tenures are for ordinary people. Heroes, like this sisterhood of wrestlers, belong to epochs.”

○ Vidya Krishnan in The Caravan, July 2023

We are like grass,
we will grow
everywhere.

If you divide us,
we will multiply.

(Slogan from Shaheen Bagh)



Image credits

- 1 Poster collage, page 10 - Authors (personal collection)
- 2 Image, page 12. From the West Bengal State Archives. Directorate of State Archives, sadte.wb.gov.in/India75/
- 3 Image, page 13. [Poster for the Maps Of Memory exhibition](#), 2025.
- 4 Systems map, page 16 – Authors (created on Kumu.com)
- 5 Image, page 28. [‘Smash Brahminical Patriarchy’ Poster created by Thenmozi Soundararajan, Shrummi, Mon Mahapatra](#). 2016.
- 6 Photo of Dr Seema Sakhare, page 34: [Jyoti Yadav, The Print](#), 2022.
- 7 Photo, page 38. Mathura with Dr Seema Sakhare. [Stree Atyachar Virodhi Parishad](#), Nagpur.
- 8 Photos, pages 40 and 42. Protests against rape of Bhanwari Devi. Vividha, sourced from. [‘Bhanwari Devi: The rape that led to India’s sexual harassment law’](#). BBC, 2017
- 9 Photo of Bhanwari Devi, page 44 (left column): [Shruti Kedia, ‘Meet the woman whose lifelong struggle laid the foundation for laws against sexual harassment in the workplace’](#), 2018.
- 10 Photo of Bhanwari Devi, page 44 (right column): [Sachin Saini, ‘Bhanwari Devi: Justice eluded her, but she stands resolute for others’](#), 2021.
- 11 Photo of Nirbhaya protests, page 49 (right column): [Shiv Nalapat, ‘Nirbhaya gang rape and murder: When students took to the streets – and the government took notice’](#), 2019
- 12 Photo of Nirbhaya protests, page 49 (left column): [Business Standard, ‘Seven years of Nirbhaya: NCW chief calls for swift execution of convicts’](#), 2019.
- 13 Cartoon, page 70: from [Demystification of the Law for Women](#), Nandita Haksar and Anju Singh, 1986.
- 14 Anti-dowry movement photo collage, page 72: [Himanshi Nagpal, ‘The Historical Journey Of Anti-Dowry Laws’](#), 2017; [Areeb Uddin Ahmed, ‘A victory without a winner: Remembering Satyarani Chaddha, the face of India’s anti-dowry movement’](#), 2021.
- 15 Cartoon, page 77 (right column): from [Demystification of the Law for Women](#), Nandita Haksar and Anju Singh, 1986.
- 16 Fire Movie Poster, page 79: http://www.impawards.com/1996/fire_ver2.html
- 17 Kunan Poshpora poster, page 85: [Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression](#).
- 18 Kunan Poshpora photo, page 87: [Mohammad Abu Bakar](#), 2017.
- 19 Image, page 89 (left column). Cover of the book [‘Do you remember Kunan Poshpora?’](#)
- 20 Kunan Poshpora remembrance day Illustration, page 89 (right column). [Mir Suhail](#), undated.
- 21 Thangjam Manorama family photo, page 91: From a tweet by [Binalakshmi Nepram](#).
- 22 Photo, page 93 (left column, top): [Indian Express, ‘Manipuri activist Irom Sharmila set to register marriage with long-time British partner’](#), 2017.
- 23 Photo, page 93 (left column, bottom). [Irom Sharmila with her husband and twins. Hindustan Times May 2019.](#)
- 24 Collage, page 103 (left column). News images from Manipur riots.
- 25 Photo, page 103 (left column, bottom). [Peasant women gather for a shivir during the Bodhgaya land struggle.](#)
- 26 Photo, page 106. Anti-nuclear activists gather at the village church to protest a curfew imposed to prevent them from going to the Kudankulam protest site. [The Caravan May 2012](#)

- 27 Photo, page 107 (left column, top). A Coast Guard aircraft overflies anti-nuclear protestors at Kudankulam Nuclear Plant. The Caravan, May 2012.
- 28 Photo, page 107 (left column, bottom). Police assault activists during a protest against the Koodamkulam N-plant. The Hindustan Times, 10 September 2012.
- 29 Photo, page 108 (right column, top). Activist Xavieramma is arrested while protesting against the Koodamkulam nuclear plant. The Caravan, 2 July 2019.
- 30 Logo: 'Kali for Women', page 109
- 31 Image of book cover, page 110 <<https://scroll.in/reel/816676/kali-for-women-gets-its-own-history-in-the-documentary-the-books-we-made>>
- 32 Poster collage, page 113: Authors
- 33 Shaheen Bagh (left column, bottom), page 115: Shalom Gauri, 'Fuel for the Fire: Inside the Community Kitchen of Shaheen Bagh', 2020
- 34 Shaheen Bagh (left column, top), page 115: Authors
- 35 Photo of young girl in Shaheen Bagh, page 118: Shalom Gauri, 'Fuel for the Fire: Inside the Community Kitchen of Shaheen Bagh', 2020.
- 36 Photo, page 121. ASHA workers protest in Kerala, The News Minute 17 April 2025.
- 37 Photo, page 122. Kerala ASHA workers cut hair as strike enters 50th day. The Hindu, 31 March 2025.
- 38 Wrestler's protest, page 123 (top of page) : Mohammad Shahamath, 'Photos: Hundreds join to mark a month of wrestlers' protest', 2023.
- 39 Wrestler's protest page 125 (left column, top): Business today, 'Wrestlers' protest: Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik, Bajrang Punia booked after scuffle with Delhi Police', 2023.
- 40 Wrestler's protest, page 125 (left column, bottom): Arun Thakur, 2023.

