

# REVIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

**Sectarian Conflict and Family Law  
in Contemporary Egypt:**  
Re-thinking the Privatization of Sexuality  
and Religion in the Post-colonial State  
*Saba Mahmood*

**Governance or Governmentality?**  
Reflections on the Palestinian Authority  
*Rema Hammami*

**Gender and Governance:**  
Claiming Rights in Post-Colonial Contexts  
*Aruna Rao*

**Casting Out "Citizenship":**  
Israel's Eviction of Palestinians  
*Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian*

**Women's Rights Activism in post-January 25 Egypt:**  
Combating the Shadow of the  
First Lady Syndrome in the Arab World  
*Hoda Elsadda*

**Fraying at the Edges?**  
Discordant notes from the margins of India Shining  
*Kalyani Menon-Sen*

**In Search of the Social:**  
Prisoners and the Poor in an Emerging  
Palestinian Social Contract  
*Penny Johnson*

**Institute of Women's Studies**



## Fraying at the Edges?

Discordant notes from the margins of India Shining

**Kalyani Menon-Sen**

*In her keynote address at the 2011 conference, Kalyani Menon-Sen, an independent researcher and activist based in Delhi, asks why violence against “women’s bodies, rights and freedoms” has increased in India when the dominant narrative of “India Shining” is of relentless economic growth, a flourishing democracy and a successful negotiation of modernity and Indian heritage and culture. Her rooted analysis argues that a neoliberal state in alliance with caste, class and gender hierarchies has produced an “upsurge in patriarchy.” She offers a number of detailed dissections of “the violence of development” particularly focusing on the lethal combination of (Hindu) religious fundamentalism and militaristic nationalism in campaigns against the Adavasis, a tribal people. She compellingly demonstrates how a resurgence in feudal patriarchy and organization has led to killings of couples who marry outside caste boundaries, and analyzes the contest within the judiciary and with women’s organizations combatting these crimes. The rich examples are complemented by a overview of the operation of “women and national honor” in the construction of “Mother India” and by a call for social movements to united “to build alliances to protect and expand democratic space.” In so doing and in her incisive link of the neoliberal state to anti-democratic hierarchies, Menon-Sen offers us a framework for comparison in understanding gender and governance in an age of empire.*

The year 2010 drew to a close on a note of hearty good cheer in India, in contrast to the gloom and doom in the financial centres of the global North, where a cold winter was made colder by the economic recession. “Pitch the question of sustained global recovery to a group of experts and cacophony ensues. But talk of India’s ride on the road to recovery, and the yeah’s ring loud. This is the big Indian story for 2010” crowed The Economic Times<sup>1</sup>. The optimism continued into

2011 with the government's annual Economic Survey confirming the impressive rate of GDP growth in 2009-10. "Whichever way you look — consumers, innovation, spending, globalisation — India is at the centre" said Citigroup CEO Vikram Pandit, while Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries, recently crowned as one of the richest men in the world, predicted that India would be a \$5-trillion economy by 2022<sup>2</sup>.

Around the same time, another official report confirming another set of impressive growth figures was released. The annual report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) showed an increase in crimes against women (from 7.9 percent in 2005 to 8.2 percent in 2009)<sup>3</sup>. Rape had the highest growth rate among violent crimes, going up from 2487 in 1971 to 21,397 in 2009. More than 27 percent of total crimes against women were reported from the national capital, Delhi, which accounted for 24 percent of rapes, 40 percent of kidnappings and abductions, 15 percent of dowry murders and 14 percent of molestation cases. Delhi also topped the list in terms of crimes against children.

The report generated the predictable outrage among women's groups and human rights activists, and the equally predictable defensive responses from the police. The Police Commissioner expressed the view that the increase in the crime rate was negligible in relation to the increase in population during the same period<sup>4</sup>. He also stated that since, in the majority of cases, the attacker was known to the victim or was a member of the victim's family, the police could do little to prevent rapes.

What the Police Commissioner did not mention was that the NCRB figures reflect only part of the picture. These numbers reflect only the cases that are registered with the police, which many women's groups maintain are less than half of total crimes against women. Moreover, they include only those offences that fall within the definition of "crime against women" - other crimes such as murder, assault, custodial violence, witch hunting, honour killings, sex-selective abortions and many others are left out of the reckoning.

A recent study found that that nearly one in four Indian men have committed an act of sexual violence at least once in their life and one in five have forced their wife or partner to have sex. More than two thirds of the Indian men surveyed for the study said that women should tolerate domestic violence for the sake of the family, and felt that domestic violence was sometimes justified<sup>5</sup>.

These statistics do not match the idea of India that has been successfully marketed both globally and nationally – a democracy committed to the ideals of non-violence, peace and respect for diversity; a nation that remains connected to its glorious past while negotiating progress and modernity with unique grace; a

vibrant economy where the energy of growth is breaking traditional barriers of caste and community.

The creation of this vision of India Shining is the result of a conscious project of collaboration and alliance-building between the neoliberal state and the power-holders within traditional caste, class and gender hierarchies from whom the state derives support and validation. The increasing deployment and justification of the use of violence as a tool of economic, political and social control is the most visible manifestation of this alliance. It is not surprising that women are the primary targets of violence, given that women's bodies and women's lives are the sites where hegemonic notions of "development", "growth" and "progress" are both constructed and contested by a range of movements and actors.

## The violence of 'development'

During the last few decades, violence has become embedded in the discourse and practice of development in India. The emergence of a political consensus (that now includes the Left) in favour of neo-liberal macro-economic 'reform' has increased the vulnerability of women from already marginalised groups, including Dalits<sup>6</sup>, Adivasis<sup>7</sup>, landless and migrant workers, informal sector workers and the urban poor. An estimated 60 million people have been displaced in the last decade by development projects of dubious value, often implemented in the face of resistance from communities<sup>8</sup>. In particular, communities that depend on natural resources for their livelihoods are threatened by the provisions of the National Environment Policy (2006), passed despite strenuous opposition from civil society, which provides justification for prioritising economic considerations above environmental sustainability<sup>9</sup>.

Changes in the policy framework to allow commercial exploitation of natural resources, particularly metals and minerals, have led to large-scale handover of forest land to corporations, including multinationals. These areas are the traditional homes of Adivasi communities, which are now being subjected to a new wave of internal colonialism. The ideology of caste, reinforced by the civilising mission initiated during the colonial period and continued by the post-colonial state, provides the moral justification for the dispossession of Adivasis from their lands and way of life.

The most horrific example of the deployment of violence for the furtherance of economic interests through the expropriation of the rights of Adivasis is the *Salwa Judum* movement in the state of Chattisgarh in central India. Officially

described as a spontaneous uprising of young men from tribal communities, *Salwa Judum*<sup>10</sup> is in fact a state-sponsored counter-insurgency campaign started in 2005 ostensibly to counter Maoist guerrillas who have established a significant presence in large parts of the state. Tribal youth (many of school-going age) have been mobilised into vigilante gangs, designated as ‘special police officers’, equipped with motorcycles and arms and given a free hand in “cleaning out” villages as part of a scorched earth policy designed to starve the Maoists of local support. Over 300,000 people from over 600 villages have been displaced and forced into camps by *Salwa Judum*. Reports by human rights organisations, citizens’ groups and government-appointed committees have documented extensive violence against women and girls by *Salwa Judum*, including gang rape, sexual mutilation, illegal confinement and disappearances of women who resisted forced relocation<sup>11</sup>.

The collaboration between the ostensibly secular Congress-led government at the centre and the BJP, the Hindu right-wing party in power in Chattisgarh in supporting and protecting *Salwa Judum* underscores the political consensus around economic policies. The man widely regarded as being the founder of the movement is a politician from the Congress Party, long the most dominant in Indian politics. The ground-level leadership of the *Salwa Judum* is dominated by traders and forest contractors, traditional exploiters of the Adivasis. Many of these “leaders” were also active in efforts to persuade communities to cede their lands to the corporations who had been granted mining rights.

Although Adivasis consider themselves distinct from and separate from Hindus, and were traditionally acknowledged as being outside the caste system, Hindu right-wing organisations are now recasting them as Hindus. The political project of ‘Hindutva’, or Hindu nationhood, rests on the idea of Hindus being indigenous to India – a claim that is challenged by the Adivasis self-identification (literally, “original inhabitants”). The movement to bring Adivasis, whom they term “*vanvasis*” or forest dwellers, back to the Hindu fold has proceeded at a fast pace in the BJP-ruled States. Since the sexual freedom and personal autonomy experienced by women in traditional Adivasi societies is a direct challenge to the Hindu patriarchal order, a key element in the reconversion is the imposition of Hindu norms related to marriage and sexual relations. For instance, the BBC recently reported that Adivasi girls who participated in a mass wedding ceremony organised by the government in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh were forced to undergo a virginity test to prove that they fulfilled Hindu norms of chastity. The government admitted that 13 girls who were found to be pregnant were excluded from the ceremony<sup>12</sup>.

Retribution for those who refuse to return to the Hindu fold is also exacted

on the bodies of women. The mass rape of Adivasi nuns by a Hindu mob in 2003 was justified by the Secretary of the VHP (a militant Hindu organisation) as a patriotic Hindu reaction to the conversion of Adivasis by Christian missionaries – a remark that the Home Minister in the BJP-led government refused to condemn.

## Caste and the resurgence of feudal patriarchy

Caste is usually described as a fundamental organising principle of society in India, but it should be noted that caste as we know it today is a modern phenomenon rather than a core civilisational value as often assumed. Dirks (2001)<sup>13</sup> has unpacked the role of colonial state in the production of caste through the bureaucratic effort to categorise and ‘freeze’ the diverse and fluid social identities, communities and modes of social organisation that the British Raj encountered in India. Caste politics was a significant element in the nationalist struggle for independence and caste assertions by leaders like Ambedkar were seen as threats to the unity of national purpose. The optimistic assumption that caste would disappear with modernity (reflected for instance in the fact that the affirmative actions built into the Constitution were time-limited) was not fulfilled – instead, caste has crystallised into perhaps the most powerful marker of poverty, exclusion, domination and oppression, and is a central focus of social movements for equality.

The rapid economic transformation experienced by some privileged regions and communities threatens entrenched hierarchies of class, caste and gender and has created the conditions for the revival of casteism in new and more powerful forms. The clan councils or *khap panchayats* in rural North India exemplify this phenomenon. These traditional bodies of the landowning Jat community claim control over large clusters of Jat-dominated villages, all the inhabitants of which are deemed to be siblings even if they are not related by blood. *Khaps* are said to have originated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and are composed of 10-15 male village elders, who claim the status of institutions of local self-governance, intervening to resolve familial and property disputes. Although the *khap* is a Jat institution, it enjoys the support of all the dominant caste groups, which are willing to sink social and political differences in the interests of solidarity against assertions by Dalits and other new claimants to political space.

The power and influence of the *khaps* has suffered considerable attrition in recent years, partly because of their supersession by elected *panchayats* under the three-tier system of local governance introduced through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to

the Constitution in 1992. Perhaps more significantly, traditional *khap* strongholds like Haryana and Punjab have seen rapid urbanisation and economic growth, creating sharp social and economic contradictions. For instance, Haryana has the highest per capita income in the country, but the lowest child sex ratio (821 girls to 1000 boys in the 0-6 age group). Sex determination followed by sex-selective abortion is widely practised. The tradition of women marrying into families of a higher social class has resulted in a surplus of brides at the top of the social order and a pronounced deficit at the bottom of the social order<sup>14</sup>.

At the same time, urbanisation, access to education and exposure to a wider world through the media has generated new aspirations in young women who are increasingly reluctant to confine themselves to the traditional female domains of kitchens and cattle-sheds. Given the diminishing pool of marriageable girls in the community, these assertions of independence have generated a high level of anxiety within families and have led to the tightening of patriarchal controls on women's sexuality. The perceived need to control daughters has revalidated the traditional *khap* function of ensuring caste endogamy and clan exogamy.

## **Marrying outside caste boundaries**

The issue became public in June 2010, when a women's group petitioned the Supreme Court of India to intervene and protect young couples who had married outside caste boundaries or married within the clan. The *khaps* were pronouncing judgements on these supposedly incestuous relationships and imposing punishments ranging from heavy fines, social boycotts or permanent exile from the village for entire families. In many cases, especially where the relationship transgressed caste boundaries or where the couple sought legal recourse, the *khaps* were ordering the concerned families to reclaim their honour by killing their offending children. The murders were brutal and were carried out in full public view, with the police turning a blind eye and the village community openly applauding the killers as heroes who had restored honour to the community. According to figures compiled by women's groups, 900 young people were victims of honour killings in a single year in the three northern states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

The Supreme Court order blew away the comfortable conviction that honour killings were a reflection of a regressive mindset that India and Indians have moved away from in the era of spectacular growth and emergence as a "global player" on the world stage. The main opposition party, the Hindu rightwing BJP<sup>15</sup> that

has always taken a sly delight in highlighting and condemning reports of honour killings from Pakistan, was forced to issue a statement condemning the *khaps*, while its sister organisations, the RSS and VHP, were vocal in supporting the right of communities to defend their “culture and tradition” To the embarrassment of the government, the Chief Minister of Haryana, himself a Jat, upheld the right of the *khaps* to maintain the “social order” and described the media furore as an over-reaction. Even more shocking was the position taken by a young politician from Haryana, a member of the ruling party’s supposedly progressive “youth brigade,” who demanded an amendment in the Hindu Marriage Act to expand the definition of consanguinity and to give the *khaps* the status of family courts under the law.

Responding to the Supreme Court, the Home Ministry proposed an amendment to the law in order to include honour killing as a specific form of murder under which families, communities and caste councils could be held collectively guilty. However, the cabinet – which includes several members of the Jat community – failed to reach a consensus on the proposed amendment, which was referred to State governments for their comments and agreement.

The furore reached a crescendo when a woman judge in a lower court in Haryana awarded the death penalty to five members of a family who were convicted – under existing laws - of the kidnapping and murder of Manoj and Babli, a young couple who had been outlawed by the *khap* because they belonged to the same clan and were therefore deemed to be siblings even though they were not blood relatives. The couple had approached the court for police protection, and were in fact kidnapped from a bus despite being accompanied an armed police escort. The head of the *khap*, on whose orders the murder was carried out (and who happened to be the girl’s grandfather) was sentenced to life imprisonment. The judgement included a strong condemnation of the *khaps*, holding them to be illegal and unconstitutional<sup>16</sup>.

The verdict was hailed by feminists and human rights activists who pointed out that it was a lack of political will that allowed the *khaps* to function, rather than any inadequacy in existing laws. On the other hand, the ruling unleashed a storm of protest from the *khaps*, who vowed to get the ruling overturned. A hastily organised *mahapanchayat* – a meeting of *khaps* across clans – was attended by thousands and a huge amount of money was collected to meet the legal expenses of the appeal. A decision was also taken to demand formal legal status and recognition for the *khaps* as institutions of local self-governance. The *mahapanchayat* was chaired by a former judge of the Rajasthan High Court who now emerged as a champion of Hindu tradition and caste pride. Another eminent



participant at the meeting, a former police chief, warned those who opposed the *khaps* and their diktats that they would also face harsh punishments.

While the media headlined the judgement as a blow against the “killer *khaps*”, public responses on blogs and websites in the aftermath of the verdict repeatedly endorsed the notion of community honour as lying in the chastity and virtue of its women, which must be preserved by keeping their bodies away from contact with “unauthorised” men<sup>17</sup>.

This view also finds reflection in the judgement pronounced by the Supreme Court while commuting the death sentence in a case where a young Brahmin man killed his sister’s husband, a Dalit whom she had married secretly. “It is common experience that when the younger sister commits something unusual and in this case it was an inter-caste, inter-community marriage out of a secret love affair, then in society it is the elder brother who justifiably or otherwise is held responsible for not stopping such an affair...if he became the victim of his wrong but genuine caste considerations, it would not justify the death sentence. The vicious grip of the caste, community, religion, though totally unjustified, is a stark reality.”<sup>18</sup>

## Why Male Violence? Unemployment and Attacks on “City Girls”

Choudhury (2010)<sup>19</sup> sees a clear link between violence against women and the high rate of male unemployment in Haryana resulting in forced bachelorhood for large numbers of young men whose lack of a job pushes them out of the marriage market. This is the group that is most vigilant in policing women’s relationships and enforcing the diktats of the *khaps*.

The anger and alienation of young men is most visible in the immediate hinterland of Delhi, in villages surrounding the satellite cities of Gurgaon and NOIDA. These villages are the target of private developers who are taking advantage of the Haryana’s government’s pro-urbanisation policies and buying up huge tracts of agricultural land for conversion into high-end real estate. *Jat* families with large landholdings, battling the negative fallouts of the Green Revolution and diminishing returns in agriculture, have queued up to sell their land. Since most land deals involve tax evasion through a component of cash payment, farming families suddenly found themselves flush with “black” cash. Young men in these families have discarded the *Jat* tradition of frugality for conspicuous consumption – large mansions, flashy cars, branded clothes, imported guns and



high-end drugs. Many of these young men turn to crime, apparently out of boredom and the need to do something – according to the Gurgaon police, rates of violent crimes such as rape, murder, extortion and kidnapping show a sharp spike in areas where real-estate developers have moved in<sup>20</sup>.

Alienated from their land and from productive work, increasingly distanced from their children who no longer respect their authority, the older generation is finding itself marginalised and disempowered. While older women sink into depression, the men turn to the *khaps* which they see as a platform that can restore their self-respect and sense of control<sup>21</sup>.

A significant number of incidents of violence against women in Delhi are attributed to young men from the villages surrounding the satellite cities<sup>22</sup>. Communities in these villages justify violence against “city girls” as fitting punishment for their immorality. A case that excited a great deal of public debate was the gang rape of a young student at a NOIDA business school who was sitting with her male friend in a parked car outside a busy mall in the early evening. The car was surrounded by a group of ten young men returning from a cricket match, who beat up the man with cricket stumps leaving him unconscious. The young woman was dragged to a nearby field and raped repeatedly. The assailants were arrested within 24 hours of the crime – they were all below 25, college dropouts from wealthy Jat families who made no attempt to hide or escape and readily admitted to what they had done. The *sarpanch* expressed surprise at the shock and outrage in the media. “They are blowing things out of proportion – she was just raped, that’s not such a big deal” he was quoted as saying. Others said that the couple were “doing something wrong” and the boys only did their duty by acting to stop it. The mother of one of the boys appeared on TV channels to say that the girl was at fault. “She must have done something to anger them. Agreed the boys made a mistake but it is not that big a crime. The girl is at fault here. These big city types come here and corrupt our village” she said.

## **Mother India: women and national honour**

Under patriarchy, the honour of the community and the honour of the nation are both inscribed on the bodies of women. Normally relegated to the margins, at times of nationalist struggle women come to symbolize the honour and virtue of the nation. They become the icons, the mother-figures for whom men are willing to lay down their lives. It is on this notion of womanhood that the cultural identity of the community and the nation is built.



Throughout the freedom movement in India, nationalists portrayed the country in feminine terms. India was “the motherland” – depicted as a mother goddess in conformity with the rules of Hindu iconography. On 14 August, 1947, the day before the country was partitioned and became a ‘nation’, the front page of a Hindu right-wing weekly, the *Organiser*, carried a map of India on which lay a woman. Her right arm (representing Pakistan) had been severed and Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, was shown standing over her with a bloody knife in his hand.

In the large-scale violence that was sparked off by the Partition, thousands of women were actually raped, abducted, sold into slavery and prostitution, both by their own men and by men of the ‘other’ community. When the time came for them to ‘go home’, many had formed new relationships and did not want to leave their husbands and children. Social workers trying to “reunite” women with their natal families was asked “Who are you to meddle in our lives?” Another woman social worker admitted that at times she sympathized with the abducted women “as a woman” but felt compelled to “act as an Indian” and force them to return. The abducted women themselves were given no choice – once she was located, she had to be brought back to her real “nation”<sup>23</sup>.

The idea of Mother India, the nation as mother goddess, continues to exert a powerful influence on the national imagination and is deployed both by the state and the Hindu right-wing to good effect in situations of crisis. The nationalism being constructed by the Hindu right wing casts women as mothers and wives, supporters of men as they struggle for a Hindu *rashtra* or nation. Feminism is explicitly condemned as a western import that subverts women to the service of individual desires and goes against traditional values. Ironically, Indian women who win crowns in international beauty competitions have been congratulated by the BJP, even as the consumerist values and lifestyles they sell are condemned as un-Indian.

In confronting neoliberalism and market capitalism, the Hindu right is faced with the same dilemmas as Indian nationalists who struggled against colonialism. Both are attracted to modernity and capitalist economic and political structures, and are struggling with anxieties about loss of a distinctive Indian identity. Chatterjee (1986)<sup>24</sup> has shown that which Nationalist Indian men handled this anxiety by emphasising the “distinctive spiritual essence” of Indian culture and highlighting Indians’ superiority to the colonisers in the “spiritual domain”, while simultaneously emphasising the need to acquire the skills, technologies and forms of economic and political organisation that enable material domination. In struggling to establish themselves as “modern but different”, Indian nationalist



men have emphasised a sharp demarcation between the “inner” or spiritual realm of the nation (in which nationalists claim superiority to and autonomy from the West) and an outer or material realm (in which the subordination of the nation to the West is acknowledged).

The burden of representing the inner realm of the nation in nationalist discourse falls largely on the figure of the “modern” Indian woman. The discourse of Indian nationalism continues to cast women as the signifiers of an essentialised “Indianness.” Oppressive gender relationships within traditional family practices such as arranged marriages and joint families are glamorised and sanctified by the popular media, and “adjustment” is emphasised as women’s primary virtue. Mainstream Indian films and TV continue to cash in on stories depicting utopian families, where parents find suitable spouses for their children, brothers lived harmoniously together and women happily accept patriarchal controls on their sexuality and economic autonomy.

Nanda (2009)<sup>25</sup> has analysed the close links between neo-liberal globalisation and Hinduism in India. Middle-class Indians are becoming more actively religious as they are becoming more prosperous. The state, ostensibly secular and socialist, is complicit in this process, as is the corporate sector. From actively promoting religious tourism, to allowing private sector trusts to run the institutions that impart ‘value-based’ (read Hindu) education, to giving away land at highly subsidised rates to *gurus* and self proclaimed god-men, the actions and policies of the government foster the promotion of Hinduism.

Violence is built into the militant forms of nationalism being promoted primarily, but not exclusively, by the Hindu right-wing in India. The conscious construction of a macho masculinity during the nationalist movement was a response to the British valorisation of Muslim “martial races” and depiction of Hindu subjects as effeminate. Violence by the lumpen stormtroopers of the Hindu right against Muslims and Christians, most recently in Gujarat and Orissa, reflects a conscious effort to demonise these groups.

## **“Good governance” and women’s rights**

Apart from the trends discussed above, the neo-liberal model of development as economic growth is threatening and constraining the political space for the achievement of women’s rights and gender equality and is widening the gap between policy and practice. This trend is visible in the changing articulation of women’s rights in public discourse and public policy in India over the last

decade. Many of the key policy documents of the 1990s reflect the contribution of activists from women's movements in policy dialogue and policy formulation during this period. As a result, feminist analyses and priorities found their way into documents like the National Policy on Education (1988) and the Approach Paper of the Ninth Five Year Plan (1995)<sup>26</sup>.

In the last decade however, there has been a steady shift towards identifying gender equality as a means - an essential precondition for development - rather than as a desirable end in itself. While policy documents contain grandiloquent rhetoric on "rights-based development," resource allocations reflect the neo-liberal maxim that sees 'economic empowerment' as the sole and sufficient requirement for gender equality. Policy-makers apparently see no contradiction between the promotion of schemes for economic empowerment simultaneously with measures such as cuts in social sector spending, the introduction of user fees in health and education, the dismantling of the public distribution system, the phasing out of agricultural subsidies, deregulation of food markets and elimination of protective labour legislation.

Women's groups are finding it increasingly difficult to challenge patriarchal and anti-poor development ideologies through mainstream institutions and processes of governance. Strategies such as participation in expert committees and groups set up to advise on policy reform, are yielding diminishing returns. The adoption by the development community of a diluted and depoliticised version of "gender mainstreaming" and the perception of microcredit as a magic bullet that can cure both poverty and women's subordination, has further constrained the space for promoting women's rights. Today, all the major national schemes for women's empowerment are in essence microcredit schemes, although they are advertised as "microcredit plus".

It would seem that, in their eagerness to promote financially viable and minimalist interventions, the government is glossing over the contradictions emerging in microfinance programmes, and are making unjustified assumptions about their "empowerment outcomes."<sup>27</sup> The Human Rights Commission has ordered an enquiry into the recent suicides of several members of women's microcredit groups in Andhra Pradesh, the southern State that has promoted thousands of self-help groups and claims that they have brought about rural transformation. It has emerged that in many cases, interest on loans is as high as 40 percent and women are trapped in debt, forced to borrow from one institution to pay off the interest on the loan from another. Many clients exist only on paper and proxy agents are operating freely in the absence of financial checks and balances.<sup>28</sup> Some well-known firms such as SKS Microfinance which recently



entered the global market with a successful international public offering, have been revealed to be indulging in dubious financial practices, in effect using the savings of poor women to further their own speculative share market operations.

While the legal framework for women's rights is being augmented with new laws on the right to information, domestic violence, sexual harassment and women's property rights, implementation mechanisms continue to be constrained by patriarchal norms and controlled by powerful caste and class interests that actively promote women's subordination. As described earlier in this paper, judicial institutions are not immune to these tendencies - pronouncements and decisions by the judiciary on issues such as domestic violence, rape, honour killings and child sexual abuse often reinforce and legitimise the patriarchal boundaries that protect the sanctity of the private domain.

Feminist research in diverse sites of contestation of women's rights over the last two decades supports the assertion that the concepts and discourses of citizenship are explicitly androcentric and do not reflect women's experiences, priorities or practices. According to Tanika Sarkar (2001)<sup>29</sup>, women will always be incomplete national subjects, because land is central to the territorial concept of the nation and women's right to own and inherit land is still a contested issue.

Women's movements in India have focused on action against violence as a strategy that can expand the political space for the exercise of democracy not only for women, but for all other struggling subordinated and oppressed groups. From a feminist perspective, political space can be conceptualised as a series of interconnected and expanding domains within which discourses and relations of production and reproduction are constructed. Starting with the self, political space expands outwards through the sphere of direct interactions to larger institutional and structural spheres. Action against violence can create opportunities for women to assert their agency and identities as rights-bearers, thus expanding the boundaries of political action and reconfiguring relationships and discourses in each of these spheres.

## **Conclusions**

This paper presents evidence from India to support the contention that the joint operation of neo-liberal macroeconomic policies, religious fundamentalism and militaristic nationalisms has created the conditions for a renewed upsurge of patriarchy and has revitalised existing hierarchies of caste and race. The sharp increase in violence against women's bodies, rights and freedoms in the decades

after liberalisation, is the most visible face of the collusion between these three global forces.

While the trends described in this paper are global, the case of India is important because of its current push for global power status. Out of the four BRIC countries that are projected to emerge as global economic powers by the middle of this century - Brazil, Russia, India and China - India is most aggressive about projecting its civilizational virtues. In this narrative, India with its Hindu civilization is presented as the bright, forward-looking side of globalisation, while Pakistan - and indeed, Islam itself - is made to stand for its dark, demonic and regressive underbelly.

The challenge for Indian social movements is build alliances to protect and expand democratic space in the face of powerful forces that are polarising and alienating social movements from each other. There are many struggles on the ground, but the lack of a cohesive political platform that can carry the aspirations of these struggles into the larger political system undermines their aspirations.

The feminist focus on violence against women has been criticised as a divisive and polarising issue that weakens social movements and makes them vulnerable. This paper supports the opposite view – that violence against women is important precisely because it can politicise seemingly neutral spaces and discourses by exposing their hidden gender, class and caste biases. Action against violence can therefore forge solidarity and alliances across these same gender, class and caste divides, and brings together movements for survival, against fundamentalism and for democracy onto a unified political platform.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Editorial in *The Economic Times*, 3 January 2010.
- 2 Rediff Business 7 March 2011. "Pandit, Ambani bet on India growth story". <<http://www.rediff.com/business/report/pandit-ambani-bet-on-india-growth-story/20110307.htm>> accessed 12 March 2011.
- 3 *Crime in India 2009*. National Crime Records Bureau. Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt of India. February 2011.
- 4 Letter from the Commissioner of Police to the Editor, *Hindustan Times*. <<http://www.delhipolice.nic.in/home/press/00021022011.pdf>> accessed 10 March 2011
- 5 International Centre for Research on Women. 2011. *Evolving Men*. Initial results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES). ICRW Washington DC. <[http://www.icrw.org/pdf\\_download/1369/download/0edf9f0390af7bf2ef7f685620b0419a](http://www.icrw.org/pdf_download/1369/download/0edf9f0390af7bf2ef7f685620b0419a)>
- 6 Groups at the bottom of the Hindu caste system ('outcastes'), traditionally forced into 'unclean' professions, and oppressed and discriminated against both socially and economically. Officially termed 'Scheduled Castes'.
- 7 The indigenous tribal people of India, officially termed 'Scheduled Tribes'.
- 8 India Social Development Report 2008. "Development and Displacement"



- 9 See for instance documents archived on the website of the Campaign for Environmental Justice in India <<http://www.esgindia.org/campaigns/envt.decision.making/index.html>> (accessed 12 March 2011)
- 10 Literally translated as “purification hunt”.
- 11 See for instance reports by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, the People’s Union for Democratic Rights, the Independent Citizens’ Initiative, the Planning Commission, the International Association of People’s Lawyers and the National Human Rights Commission archived on <<http://www.otherindia.org/>>
- 12 Virginity test for Adivasi women in state-sponsored Hindu way of marriage. BBC, 14 July 2009.
- 13 Dirks, Nicholas B. (2001). “Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India”. Princeton University Press. USA.
- 14 Chowdhry, Prem (2010). “Redeeming honour through violence: Unravelling the concept”. CEQUIN, New Delhi.
- 15 Bharatiya Janata Party, or the Indian Peoples’ Party.
- 16 *The death sentence awarded by the trial court in the Manoj and Babli murder case has recently been commuted by the High Court, which also dismissed the case against the khap chief on the grounds of insufficient evidence. This has been hailed as a victory by the khaps.*
- 17 See for instance archived footage of the panel discussion on honour killings on Zee News, aired on 12 May 2010.
- 18 Supreme Court of India in Dilip Premnarayan Tewari and Another versus State of Maharashtra. Criminal appeal number 1026 of 2008.
- 19 Chowdhry, Prem (2010). Op. cit.
- 20 “Corrupted by Cash: Delhi’s urban villages”. India Today. 20 October 1997.
- 21 Menon-Sen, Kalyani. Unpublished. Case studies and interviews with residents of Bijwasan and Kapashera villages, Gurgaon.
- 22 The Hindustan Times. - February 2011. Interview with Delhi Police Commissioner.
- 23 Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. 1998. Borders and boundaries: Women in India’s partition. Kali for Women. New Delhi.
- 24 Chatterjee, Partha. 1986. Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse?. Zed Books, London.
- 25 Nanda, Meera (2009). The God Market: How globalisation is making India Hindu. Random House, India.
- 26 Majumdar, Vina. 2000. “From Equality to Empowerment for Women: Variations in Perspectives or the Politics of Language?” Centre for Women’s Development Studies, New Delhi (mimeo).
- 27 Nirantar (2007). “Examining self-help groups: A qualitative study”. Nirantar, New Delhi.
- 28 See for instance “Microfinance – is it macro usury?” Business Outlook India 18 October 2010. <<http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?267394>> (accessed 13 March 2011)
- 29 Sarkar, Tanika (2001) “Hindu wife, Hindu nation: Community, religion and cultural nationalism”. Permanent Black, New Delhi.