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Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender*

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I

Suddenly 'women' are everywhere. Development experts cite 'gender bias as the cause of poverty in the Third World'; population planners declare their commitment to the empowerment of Indian women; economists speak of the feminization of the Indian labour force. In 1991-2, for instance, the People's War Group of the CPI(M-L) found themselves drawn increasingly into women's campaigns against sexual and domestic violence, dowry, and the sale of arrack or country liquor. Upper-caste women thronged the streets in the anti-Mandal protests; women are among the best-known leaders of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement; the BJP have identified women and Dalits as the principal targets of their next election campaign. Film after film features the new woman, who also

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figures prominently in Doodarshan programmes. In overwhelming numbers, women joined the literacy campaigns in Pondicherry and parts of Andhra Pradesh. The anti-arrack movement initiated by rural women destabilized the economy of Andhra Pradesh.

How might we 'read' the new visibility of women across the political spectrum? What does it represent for gender theory and feminist practice today? For all those who invoke gender here, 'women' seems to stand in for the subject (agent, addressee, field of inquiry) of feminism itself. There is a sense, therefore, in which the new visibility is an index of the success of the women's movement. But clearly this success is also problematic. A wide range of issues rendered critical by feminism are now being invested in and annexed by projects that contain and deflect that initiative. Possibilities of alliance with other subaltern forces (Dalits, for example) that are opening up in civil society are often blocked, and feminists find themselves drawn into disturbing configurations within the dominant culture. We attempt in this chapter to understand the implications of this phenomenon. We feel our task is all the more urgent since the crisis in feminism is clearly related to the crisis of democracy and secularism in our times.

In the 1970s and 1980s, an important task for feminist theory was to establish 'gender' as a category that had been rendered invisible in universalisms of various kinds. In Hyderabad, for example, the campaign against 'eve-teasing' taken up by women students in the early 1970s brought into the open the hostile and sexually threatening conditions all women had to deal with everyday, not only in the university, but also on the streets and in every kind of work-place. Through public interest litigation, as in the cases of injectable contraceptives (Net-Oen) and police rape, and appeals against a variety of judgements—on custodial rape, family violence, restitution of conjugal rights—we demonstrated the asymmetries and inequalities in gender relations that underwrote the notion of rights and the legal process. We demanded changes that would make the law more sensitive to the cultural and economic contexts of women's lives. Women's groups investigating 'dowry deaths' demonstrated how the designation of the family as private domain restricted women's access to protection against domestic violence. They exposed the collusion of the law, police, medical system, and the family in classifying these deaths as suicides. Feminist scholars worked to salvage gender and women's issues from being subsumed by class analysis, sought to extend the Marxist understanding of labour to include domestic production, and pointed out the marginality and vulnerability

of women in the workforce; disciplinary formations such as history or literature were critically discussed, and alternative narratives produced that foregrounded women. We demonstrated gross inequalities in women's access to health care systems or to 'development', and examined patriarchal ideologies as they worked across a wide range of institutions. These initiatives extended our understanding of the micro-politics of civil society, showing how pervasively mechanisms of subjugation operated, and how processes of othering functioned in relation to women.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s—the Mandal/Mandir/Fund-Bank years—however, we face a whole new set of political questions.¹ Entering into new alliances we have begun to elaborate new forms of politics. These have demanded engagement with issues of caste and religious affiliation/community and with new problems emerging from the 'liberalization' of the economy, creating contexts in which the contradictions implicit in earlier initiatives have become increasingly apparent. For example, feminists calling for a uniform civil code in the context of the Shah Bano case soon realized the difficulty of distinguishing their position from that of an aggressively anti-Muslim lobby, and began to downplay the demand as 'Shah Bano' became the rallying cry for Hindutva. Similarly, in Chunduru, sexual harassment was cited as justification for the punishment meted out to Dalits by upper-caste men. More recently, leftist women's organizations in Hyderabad were placed in a dilemma about joining in a protest against the arrest and torture of a Muslim student accused of 'eve-teasing'. Debates around the introduction of hormonal implants and injectables into the national family planning programmes reveal analogous contradictions that underlie notions such as women's freedom, self-determination, or their right to choose. We feel that the kind of contradictions that confront gender analysis are structurally similar to those that face class analysis, caste initiatives and, more broadly, democracy and secularism today. In this chapter, our concern is to investigate the relationship of these contradictions to the gender, caste, class, and community composition of the 'subject' in the dominant order. Historically, this citizen-subject has been underwritten, and naturalized, by the 'humanism' that presents it as politically neutral.

¹ We use 'Mandal' to refer to the anti-Mandal (anti-reservation) agitation, 'Mandir' to refer to the Ramjanmabhoomi movement to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya-Faizabad, and 'Fund-Bank' to refer to the era of structural adjustment policies promoted in India by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

II

Gender analysis, like class analysis, had revealed how the humanist subject and the social worlds predicated onto it functioned in such a way as to legitimize bourgeois and patriarchal interests. What has never been really apparent, however, is the way in which both Marxist and feminist politics continue to deploy other dimensions of the hidden structuring (such as caste or community) of the humanist subject, as well as the premises of secularism—democracy invoked by it. We have been unable, therefore, to critically confront inequalities of caste or community implicit in that subject or its worlds. We have also found it difficult to radicalize the concepts of secularism and democracy to meet the political requirements of our times. We shall be arguing in this chapter that these tasks call for an investigation and critique of the humanist premises that not only underwrite the politics of dominance but also configure the 'subject of feminism'.

The notion of the 'human' as it appears in political theory, and more importantly in humanist common sense is inextricable from what has been termed the metaphysics of substance. Framed by this metaphysics, the human appears as a substantive base that precedes and somehow remains *prior* to and outside of structurings of gender, class, caste, or community. In liberal political theory, it is this human core that provides the basis for legal personhood. Humanist Marxism offers a critique of the class investments of liberal individualism, but preserves the normative idea of a human essence, principally in the concept of alienation and in teleological notions of history but also in the notion of ideology as *false consciousness*. Humanist feminism, too, is predicated on notions of female alienation from a putative human wholeness. Even across significant political and theoretical divides, the notion of a human essence that remains resolutely outside historical or social coding continues to operate as 'common sense'. It is not difficult to see that these theories, and their politico-legal derivatives, actually produce what they claim to recognize. For example, by basing the *rights of the individual* on the fiction of a substantive human core,² the law creates that core, or more precisely, a core-effect; the idea of *alienation* gains force only as it measures itself against a human fullness; *teleological narratives of history* find resolution only in a fully and recognizably human world.

² For a relevant discussion of the metaphysics of substance and the question of rights, see Mary Poovey, 'The Abortion Question and the Death of Man', in Joan Scott and Judith Butler (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Routledge, London, 1991).

Thus produced, this human subject, on whom the whole question of 'rights' is predicated, was imaged as the citizen-subject and the political subject. This imaging, (a) articulated gender, caste and community (and initially even class) only in the realm of the social; (b) marked these as *incidental* attributes of a *human self*; and, (c) rendered invisible the historical and social/cultural structuring of the subject of politics. The shaping of the normative human-Indian subject involved, on the one hand, a dialectical relationship of inequality and opposition with the classical subject of Western liberalism and, on the other, its structuring as upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu, and male. The structuring was effected by processes of *othering/differentiation* such as, for example, the definition of upper-caste/class female respectability in counterpoint to lower-caste licentiousness, or Hindu tolerance towards Muslim fanaticism, and by a gradual and sustained transformation of the institutions that govern everyday life.³ Elaborated and consolidated through a series of conflicts, this structuring became invisible as this citizen-self was designated as modern, secular, and democratic.⁴

Our strategy in this chapter will be to examine certain 'events', such as Mandal or the rise of the Hindu Right, in which contemporary feminist analysis is coming up against certain *impasses*. These *impasses* indicate, on the one hand, a fracturing of the humanist consensus that has been the basis of left- as well as right-wing politics and, on the other, an opening up of possibilities for new political alignments and initiatives. These events, it seems to us, characterize the moment of the contemporary and might be investigated as metonyms of gender in which cultural meanings are being contested and refigured.

³ The historical emergence of the citizen-subject in India has been explored in the impressive work of scholars like Kumkum Sangari, Uma Chakravarti, Lata Mani, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, and others. See Kumkum Sangari, 'Relating Histories: Definitions of Literacy, Literature, Gender in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta and England', in Svati Joshi (ed.), *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History* (Trianka, Delhi, 1991); Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 'Introduction' to Sangari and Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Kali for Women, Delhi, 1989); Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past'; Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India'; Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', all in *Recasting Women*; Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990).

⁴ For a fine account of how Satyajit Ray effects the consolidation of this human, citizen-subject in the freshly-minted realism of the Apu trilogy, see Geeta Kapur, 'Cultural Creativity in the First Decade: The Example of Satyajit Ray', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 23-4 (Jan. 1993), pp. 17-50.

Obviously, each of these metonyms has a separate and particular history. But since our focus here is on the contemporary moment, we are concerned less with the emergence of these 'events', more with the impress of history on the present. In a strict sense, then, our approach is genealogical. We wish to explore historical conflicts as they structure everyday life and affect political initiatives in our time. The aim is to initiate a polemic that will render visible the points of collision and the lines of force that have hitherto remained subterranean, and construct instruments that will enable struggles on this reconfigured ground.

III

Our first metonym is Mandal-Chunduru, where we investigate the articulation of the gender question in the hegemonic culture of the 1990s. In both Mandal and Chunduru, 'women' were foregrounded, although in different ways. 'Women' came to be invoked here as, in a sense, feminist subjects: assertive, non-submissive, protesting against injustice done to them as *women* (Chunduru) or as *citizens* (the anti-Mandal agitation). An examination of the hidden structuring of this feminist subject would, we believe, reveal its similarities with the subject of humanism, marked—in a way that requires the occlusion of the marking—by class, caste, and community.

Mandal

The background is one familiar to most of us. The then Prime Minister V.P. Singh's announcement on 7 August 1990, of the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations for reservations of 27 per cent for Backward Castes, apart from 22.5 per cent for SC/STs in government service and public sector jobs, sparked off student riots, primarily in North India, but also in Hyderabad and a few other places. The methods of protest ranged from street-cleaning and boot-polishing to self-immolation; the discourses deployed most significantly were those of Unrewarded Merit and the Salvation of the Nation.⁵ The actual course of events is too well-known to require recounting here. What we would like to focus on is the imaging of women in the anti-Mandal agitation, preceded by a

⁵ These activities were designed to signify that meritorious men and women, who would otherwise occupy white-collar positions, would be forced as a result of the reservations policy to earn a menial's livelihood.

brief discussion of the way in which the agitation itself was represented in the media.

Indian Express editor Arun Shourie, rousing the upper-caste youth to action in his editorials, spoke of 'the intense idealism and fury' of the students (*Indian Express*, 29 Sept. 1990). A well-known intellectual denounced the reservations for OBCs as a 'transgression of moral norms' and as a political practice that would 'destroy the structure of democratic politics' (Veena Das, *Statesman*, 3 Sept. 1990). She spoke of the 'hidden despair' of the 'youth', and the government's refusal to recognize that 'people' 'may be moved by utopias, not interests'. The media's invocation of *students*, *youth*, and *people* was marked by a strange consensus on usage—these terms were obviously unmarked, yet referred only to those who were upper-caste or middle-class. An editorial in the *Independent* bemoaned the fact that the middle-class now had no place in India (4 Oct. 1990), suggesting that somehow they were the only legitimate political subjects/actors in a democracy. Only the subject of humanism could claim the utopias of the Enlightenment.

The Nation was a central figure in the anti-Mandal discourse. Claiming the heritage of Jawaharlal Nehru (a 1950s speech of Nehru's that was widely circulated, asserting that reservations would produce a 'second-rate' nation), the anti-Mandalites saw themselves as the authentic bearers of secularism and egalitarianism. Equality, they argued, would be achieved by a transcendence or a repudiation of caste, community, and gender identifications. For feminists who had struggled for years to inscribe gender into the liberal model, the Mandal issue posed a difficult question. Young middle-class women began to declare that they were against the reservations for women that had been announced in Andhra Pradesh for instance, as well as against the idea of reserving seats for women in public transport. Reservations (like subsidies) were *concessions*, and would make women 'soft', they said, reducing their ability to be independent and strong. In the anti-Mandal protests, women often appear not as sexed beings but as free and equal citizens, as partners of the rioting men, jointly protesting the erosion of 'their' rights. The nearly unanimous media celebration of the upper-caste students framed them within a non-sectarian nationalism and humanism; these young men and women were truly egalitarian and therefore anti-Mandal, whereas pro-Mandal groups were accused of supporting a resurgent casteism.

We asserted earlier that 'the Indian' comes into being in a dialectical relationship of inequality with the Western subject of humanism. In the first two decades or so after Independence, the post-colonial 'Indian' lays

claim to a more egalitarian liberalism than that produced in the age of empire and in the heart of empire. Nehruvian socialism takes shape after the Soviet example of state planning, although allowing for a 'mixed' economy that retains large numbers of middle-class professionals in the public sector. In the global configuration that has emerged after the collapse of the second world, in the context of economic 'liberalization' in India and the gradual erosion of the public sector, the neo-nationalist Indian subject proclaims its Indianness even as it internationalizes itself. Now claiming equality with the Western subject of humanism on the latter's own terms, the 'Indian' aggressively demands the rejection of everything that would come in the way of its achieving an equal place in the new world order.

Whereas in the Nehru years the retarders of progress were seen as casteism, fundamentalism, or feudalism, and the role of the state was to help overcome these, in the Fund-Bank years these 'evils' are imaged as being located in welfarism and in the state-controlled public sector itself. The 'failure' and 'inefficiency' of the public sector is seen primarily as the outcome of the reservations policy; if becoming 'efficient', therefore, is the only way of integrating India into the world economy, then the obvious means of achieving this is to abolish reservations and establish a meritocracy. The sociologist André Beteille argued recently that no one wants to defend a caste hierarchy today;⁶ but what he did not add was that the new secular hierarchy—a meritocracy premised on efficiency—refigures, transforms, and redeploys caste. In an article written during the anti-Mandal agitation, BJP leader K.R. Malkani mentioned 'a vice president of the IBM' who 'joked that they have so many Indians, and they are so good, that they in the IBM have decided not to employ any more, since they could just take over the IBM! Read the Brahmin for the educated Indian, and you have some idea of our wealth and brain power' (*The Daily*, 11 Oct. 1990). After the self is marked upper class/upper caste, the process of marking, as we have already suggested, becomes invisible. The recomposition of the middle class, the secular class that stands in for the nation, is thus predicated on the redeployment and othering of caste.⁷ Professing secularism enables a displacement of caste (and also community) from the middle class sphere, so that it gets marked as what lies *outside*, is *other*

⁶ In a public lecture on caste in modern India, delivered at the University of Hyderabad, January 1992.

⁷ The media always uses the term 'caste groups' or 'caste organizations' to refer to lower-caste groups. As K. Satyanarayana has pointed out, 'caste' usually refers only to lower caste.

than, the middle class. In the consolidation of the middle class and in the othering of caste, 'women' play a crucial role.

Not only were women visually foregrounded by the media during the agitation, they also took part in large numbers in the struggle to do away with reservations for backward castes and Dalits. A report in the *Free Press Journal* says: 'The girls of Jadavpur University were the most militant and wanted to blockade roads and defy the law' (15 Oct. 1990). In many cities, hitherto 'apolitical' women students participated enthusiastically in demonstrations and blockades, mourning the 'death of merit' and arguing the need to save the nation. Wives of IAS officers demonstrated in the capital on behalf of their children, who they claimed were being denied their rightful share in the nation. The fact of women 'taking to the streets' became in the hegemonic culture iconic of an idealism that recalled the days of the freedom struggle. The marking of 'women' as middle class and upper caste has a long genealogy that, historically and conceptually, goes back into nationalism as well as social reform.⁸ Marked thus, 'women' are seen as morally pure and uncorrupted—hence the significance of their protest, which becomes a 'disinterested' one since they have no place in the organized political process.⁹ However, as a powerful strand of nationalism asserts, it is women who are entrusted with the task of saving the nation. In actuality, the nation is frequently imaged as 'woman' (Bharatmata, Mother India).

The re-emergence of women in the public sphere as claimants to the nation and to citizenship results in a masculinization of the lower castes. To rephrase the title of a well-known feminist book, in Mandal—Chundururu, all the women are upper caste (and, by implication, middle-class Hindu) and all the lower castes are men. As we argued earlier, in the anti-Mandal agitation, 'women' feature as citizens and not necessarily as gendered beings. But the representation in the media of their well-nourished faces and fashionable bodies visually defined the lower castes as Other. The photographs of the anti-Mandal women suggested that caste (read lower caste) is defined against 'women', and against the assertive and articulate humanist-feminist subject. As Sangari and Vaid have argued, 'the description and management of gender and female sexuality

⁸ See the articles in *Recasting Women* by Partha Chatterjee and Uma Chakravarti, as well as the introduction to Susie Tharu and Lalita K. (eds), *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, vol. II (Feminist Press, New York, 1993).

⁹ That 'this student movement' 'articulates political processes that lie outside the domain of organized politics' was Veena Das's characterization of the anti-Mandal agitation in 'A Crisis of Faith' (*Statesman*, 3 Sept. 1990).

is involved in the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality'.¹⁰ Sexuality was a *hidden* issue in Mandal, as an interview with an anti-Mandal woman student suggested. The student had held in a demonstration a placard reading: 'We want employed husbands.' When asked why, she said that reservations would deprive their men of employment. In that case, why should they not marry 'backward' boys? "'But how can that be . . .", her voice trailed off' (Jyoti Malhotra, *The Independent*, 26 Aug. 1990). The anti-Mandal women had learned to *claim* deprivation and injustice, now not as women but as *citizens*, for to ground the claim in gender would pit them against middle-class men. The claiming of citizenship rather than sisterhood now not only set them against Dalit men but also against lower-caste/class women.

Chundururu

Interestingly, it is the claim to sisterhood that accomplishes the same effect in Chundururu. To sketch the context: in the culmination of a series of hostile encounters spread across at least two to three years, on 6 August 1991, in the village of Chundururu in coastal Andhra Pradesh, thirteen Dalits were murdered by upper-caste Reddys. The catalyzing 'event' appeared to be the *incursion into the cinema hall space reserved by tradition for members of the upper castes by a young Dalit graduate, who was later beaten up, forced to drink liquor, and marched to the Chundururu police station, where he was 'accused of harassing upper-caste women in an inebriated condition'*.¹¹

After the carnage of 6 August, the mourning Dalits organized a funeral procession, during which some haystacks and thatched roofs were set on fire. Most of the Reddy males had left Chundururu to avoid arrest. The upper-caste women who stayed behind complained loudly of harassment by the Dalits, suggesting that their present accusations stemmed from a long history of grievances against Dalit men. The women claimed that they had been tied to trees and kerosene poured over them, and only the arrival of the police saved them from death.

Shortly after, the Reddys of the region formed a 'Sarvajanabhyudaya Porata Samithi' along with the Kammas, Brahmins, Kapus, Rajus, and Vaishyas, and organized processions, *dharnas*, and roadblocks to protest their 'oppression' at the hands of Dalits.¹² The upper-caste women, they

¹⁰ *Recasting Women*, p. 5.

¹¹ We base this narrative of the events on Samata Sanghatana's report, published in *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVI: 36 (1991), pp. 2079–84.

¹² For this information, we are indebted to K. Balagopal's report, 'Post-Chundururu

contended, had been systematically harassed by Dalit men. Accusations of eve-teasing and assault multiplied, post-Chundururu. On 13 August in Kollipara village near Tenali, a Dalit boy was beaten up by upper-caste boys for teasing 'a schoolgirl'; a report dated, 11 August 1991, said that earlier in the month, a Dalit student was stabbed on the pretext that he had teased 'three girls'. The original cinema hall story was recorded as one about 'a Harijan youth putting his feet up on the seat in front in the cinema hall occupied by a caste Hindu girl' (*Statesman*, 9 Aug. 1991). In Chundururu itself, the story went, just before 6 August, when Dalit labourers were no longer employed for transplantation and women from the landlords' family had undertaken the task, Dalit men were supposed to have accosted the women one day, quarrelled with them, stripped them naked, and forced them to remove the transplanted seedlings and re-plant them. Enraged upper-caste women attacked the convoys of Chief Minister Janardhana Reddy and former Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao, blaming the State for not providing them protection from the Dalits.

Years of sexual abuse of Dalit women by upper-caste men appear under the sanction of 'custom' while the alleged 'eve-teasing' of upper-caste women by Dalit men invokes the horrors and prohibitions/punishments of major transgression, the penalty of death. Chundururu drew the attention of urban women's groups, but especially for those feminists who had refused to be part of the anti-Mandal agitation and were attempting to build fragile alliances with Dalit organizations, the hegemonic articulation of the gender issue as one of 'molestation' (of upper-caste women) was deeply problematic. But to counterpose this against the molestation of Dalit women was equally problematic.

Feminists can grapple with this problem only by addressing the key role played by caste in the making of the middle-class woman. In the nineteenth-century *bhadralok* campaigns against Vaishnav artistes, as much as in the anti-nautch initiatives in Madras Presidency, the virtue and purity of the middle-class woman emerged in contrast to the licentiousness of the lower-caste/class woman. It is a logic that continues to operate, as for instance in the cases of Rameeza Bee and the Birati rapes: the women crying rape were 'prostitutes' and therefore had no right to complain of sexual harassment.¹³ A woman's right over her body and

and Other Chundururus', in *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVI: 42 (1991), pp. 2399-405.

¹³ See Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Rameeza Bee and the Ahmed Hussain Case (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1978), and Tanika Sarkar, 'Reflections on

control over her sexuality is conflated with her *virtue*. So powerful does this characterization become that only the middle-class woman has a right to purity. In other words, only *she* is entitled to the name of woman in this society. Again we see, as in Mandal, the masculinization of the lower-castes—the Dalits only male, the women only upper-caste. The category of 'woman', and therefore in a very important sense the field of feminism as well as the female subject, emerge in this context by obscuring the Dalit woman and marking the lower caste as the predatory male who becomes the legitimate target of 'feminist' rage.

IV

The introduction into national 'family welfare' or population control programmes of long-acting hormonal implants and injectables, and possibly also of RU 486, the abortifacient pill, is the metonym through which we would like to explore contradictions implicit in feminist demands for freedom, choice, and self-determination.

Women's groups and health activities in India have opposed these contraceptives on several grounds. They have commented on the dangerous side-effects (disturbed menstruation, hypertension, risk of embolism, nervousness, vomiting, dizziness, etc.) and contra-indications (these drugs may not be used by women with any history of liver or heart problems, diabetes, clotting defects, cancer, migraine, recent abortion, irregular cycles, or smoking). They have pointed out that the administration of such contraceptive technologies depend on well-equipped health-care systems. Existing public health facilities in India are nowhere near adequate for screening potential users, inserting and removing implants, and providing continued monitoring of user health. They warn of the risks involved in using drugs not developed or standardized for women in India. They argue that hormonal contraceptives should not be introduced before conducting epidemiological and biochemical studies that take into account differences in weight, diet, and so on, between Indian women who will use these contraceptives and the 'average' Western woman.¹⁴ All told, it becomes evident that considered as contraceptives

Birati Rape Cases: Gender Ideology in Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVI: 5 (1991), pp. 215-18.

¹⁴ The high costs of the contraceptives (one set of Norplant implants will cost the Indian government around Rs 750) and the profits that will accrue is also an important issue, but was not raised by activists.

for Indian women who are not part of the urban middle class, the profiles of Norplant, Net-Oen and RU 486 are abysmal.

International organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Population Council who fund research on these contraceptives and promote their use, as well as the multinational corporations that manufacture them, invoke the founding demands of the women's movement itself as they market these drugs. Women's lives, rights of self-determination and choice, privacy, autonomy, and empowerment is now on the agenda of multinational capital. What is more, powerful feminist lobbies such as the Feminist Majority in the USA endorse these claims. Consider a widely publicized statement by Werner Foros, president of the Washington-based Population Institute, released in Bombay as part of an initiative to counter efforts by Indian women's groups to oppose Norplant. While Foros does cite resource shortage in third world countries as an important factor in population planning, he seems far more distressed that a majority of women in such countries had no control over their fertility, that the important right of 'choice' was not available to them. In the same statement, he quotes a survey in which 300 million women worldwide had said that they hadn't wanted their last child; 'women today do two-thirds of the work, earn only one-tenth of the money and own less than one per cent of the property. So the empowerment of women is perhaps the most important intervention we can pursue.' His goal was a population programme in which the 'poorest of poor couples has the means to make a choice'.¹⁵

Similarly, the scientist Etienne-Emile Baulieu—consultant and spokesperson for the multinational Roussel-Uclaf who have developed the abortifacient pill, RU 486—speaks of it as the 'moral property of women'. It is a duty, he claims, to make the right to this property available in the third world: 'Denying this pill is basically signing the death warrant

¹⁵ 'Men's attitudes are big hurdles', interview with Sonora Jha Nambiar, *The Sunday Times (of India)*, 1 Nov. 1992, p. 11. In what appeared to be a well organized campaign, Fornos, Sai, and other functionaries of these and similar organizations seemed to have been brought to India principally to endorse the government's Norplant programme, stalled by a writ filed by some feminist organizations. They were provided high profile coverage in the press (Rahul Singh, Bachi Karkaria, Darryl D'Monte, Rashme Seghal interviewed them and discussed Norplant). The articles invoked the horrors of an expanding India, welcomed scientific advances such as Norplant and decried women's protest against it as 'vociferous and clearly misguided', misinformed, 'unfortunate and politicized', and as holding up progress when the country was on the brink of disaster.

for the 200,000 women who die [worldwide] annually from abortion.¹⁶ Fred Sai, president of Planned Parenthood, feels that the most serious problem facing India's otherwise praiseworthy efforts at population control is the lack of 'contraceptive options' that are offered to the Indian woman and the consequent limits to the choices she can make as an individual with an individualized profile of requirements.¹⁷

The feminist credentials of those who research into and promote these contraceptives are further consolidated when their initiatives are presented as enabling and empowering women in conservative or religion-bound contexts. Thus the campaign for the abortifacient pill stressed the fact that women would initiate and control the abortion process themselves, and that they could do so without telling anyone else in the family. In brief, the promise was of technologically bypassing social or legal prohibition: 'What could be more private than taking a pill, how could a state control swallowing?'¹⁸ In the USA the Feminist Majority spoke of anti-abortionists as the common enemy of women and science, since 'both women's health and freedom of research are being sacrificed by allowing anti-abortion extremists to block the production and distribution of RU 486'.¹⁹ Proponents of Norplant and Net-Oen in India argue that long-acting implants or injectables that do not interrupt intercourse and do not require women to do anything on a regular basis are particularly suitable for an illiterate and backward population. They also point out that these drugs expand the options open to women, and allow Indian women to take decisions about contraception that do not require the cooperation of their husbands or the sanction of their families. Choice and privacy are both invoked in the battle which is set up as one between the good, progressive, pro-woman scientists and promoters of these contraceptives, and their conservative, anti-woman opponents. Thus the 'limited options' offered by our population programme are attributed 'to the conservative Indian medical mindset, which has reservations about hormonal contraceptives' (*Times of India*, 1 Nov. 1992), while the stalling of Net-Oen and

¹⁶ Fern Chapman, 'The Politics of the Abortion Pill', *Washington Post*, 3 Oct. 1989, p. 13. Cited in Renate Klein, Janice G. Raymond and Lynette J. Dumble, *RU 486 Misconceptions, Myths and Morals* (Spinnifex, Melbourne, 1991).

¹⁷ Quoted by Sara Adhikari in 'Countdown to Disaster', *The Sunday Times (of India)*, 1 Nov. 1992, p. 11.

¹⁸ Ellen Goodman, 'Moral Property', *The Boston Globe*, 17 July 1989, p. 11. Cited Klein, et al., p. 25.

¹⁹ Klein, et al., pp. 5-6. The recent decision to make RU 486 available in the USA was seen as a feminist victory.

Norplant, first by feminist litigation and later by the drug controller who has called for fresh trials, is decried respectively as 'unfortunate and politicized' (*The Independent*, 22 Oct. 1992), the handiwork of a few 'vociferous and clearly misguided' groups (*The Week*, 16 Nov. 1992), and as inefficiency and 'procrastination that hinders real progress' (*Times of India*, 1 Nov. 1992).

The figure of the woman that is being liberated and endowed with rights in these discourses requires scrutiny. The use of these contraceptives is premised on the notion that wise planning and scientifically developed products can fulfil women's demands for liberty and self-determination (and catapult them into modernity) without changes in existing family relations or in society at large; in other words, the promise is of a technological fix that can bypass sexual politics and indeed the network of relations in which women are gendered and subjugated. For example, most of the women who die attempting abortion die not because existing methods are unsafe but because abortion is *illegal*, and has to be done furtively in ill-equipped places and possibly by untrained personnel. This fact finds no place in these statements; neither does the fact that problems arise even in countries like India where abortion is legal, because a 'standardized' medical education does not train doctors to perform abortions. The abortifacient pill is not going to change that situation; indeed, as a technology it is designed to evade such issues and ends up, (a) placing the entire burden for what continues to be a difficult and often illegal procedure on the individual woman; (b) putting women's health in considerable danger; and (c) ruthlessly expanding what might be thought of as 'reasonable' risk and 'tolerable' pain or discomfort to make up for the irrationality of the system.

Norplant was developed as a drug that could be used on unruly and recalcitrant populations not only in the third world but also in the first. It targets the woman, is long-acting, does not need a literate or numerate user, does not require the user's cooperation after it has been implanted, and can be monitored by the authorities with just a glance at the woman's arm. Despite the huge investments in propaganda about woman's choice, Norplant's potential as an instrument of control was clearly recognized. In the USA, less than a month after it was passed by the Food and Drug Administration, a judge ordered that a convicted woman should not be let out on probation unless she agreed to have the implant. A newspaper editorial suggested that because of growing poverty among the blacks, welfare mothers should be offered incentives to use Norplant (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 Dec. 1990). Norplant is now promoted in much-advertised

population control programmes in some of the most coercive regimes in the third world—Chile, Indonesia, the Philippines, China—and the somewhat less obliging Indian government is described as 'lacking political commitment' or indulging in 'procrastination . . . that hinders real progress when the country is 'hurtling towards disaster'.

Women's freedom, agency, and choice is invoked only within the closed-off, private domains of the family and of reproduction, which are in turn imaged as extremely—and unchangeably—conservative and chauvinist. These assumptions underlie the production and marketing of the contraceptives, but they are socially endorsed, elaborated, and reproduced in the family welfare programme as a whole through advertising campaigns, institutional arrangements and attitudes. In addition, the wide range of sexual and familial relations that exist in the country and the variety of subject-positions that are therefore available to a woman are, in the process, homogenized and naturalized in a conservative mode. For example, these contraceptives assume that women have no control over the conditions in which they get pregnant; that contraception cannot be negotiated or discussed by the couple; that the woman has no right to refuse sex. No attempt is made to reinforce or envisage more egalitarian relationships or place responsibility on the man. In the world of the family welfare programme, a man who is not a male chauvinist is a contradiction in terms. No questions are asked about the nature and quality of existing health care systems and the complex factors that mediate different women's access to them. The politics of the private is not addressed, and no questions are asked about the contradictions between various women's requirements and the national and internationalist agendas of population control. Women's freedom begins to look alarmingly like the freedom to consume these expensive and dangerous products in a climate of disinformation that makes a mockery of 'consent'. These discourses continue to address the question of women's rights and invoke women as free agents in vocabulary drawn from feminism, but only within the once again depoliticized and privatized domains of the family and of reproduction.

The problem is that a whole range of issues that constitute the subjugation of women, and indeed their differential subjugation in relation to class, caste, and community, are naturalized in the 'woman' whose freedom and right to privacy is invoked and who becomes the bearer of the 'right' to choose. The very same move also makes it possible to bring this individual's rights into alignment with the interests of population control and multinational profit. For instance, hormonal injectables/

implants might be considered as expanding contraceptive options for women in situations where they have ready access to an efficient and well-equipped medical set-up. To put it in different terms, for a woman whose caste, class, and community positioning matches that of the citizen-subject, hormonals might be regarded as genuine 'choices'. Yet, ironically, these contraceptives were never developed for this woman. They were intended for 'less desirable' demographic groups: the teeming millions of the third world, non-white immigrants in the first world, criminals. Corresponding, in our national context, are the rural 'masses' and the urban poor, a majority of whom are Dalits and Muslims, and of course Muslims in general. Feminists using arguments about women's health have been able to drive a wedge into one fault-line in this structure. Yet untouched however are issues of caste, class, and community that require us to expand the problematic beyond that of the 'rights of the liberal body'. Women—as individuals or in groups—have to bear the increasingly heavy burden of these contradictions as they invent resources with which to negotiate their ever more demanding citizenship and to survive.

V

Hindutva Women

Women on the Right have also opened up a space that might in many ways be regarded as feminist. As Tanika Sarkar points out in a study of the Rashtrasevika Samiti (the women's wing of the RSS), women are 'active political subjects' not only in the Samiti, but also more generally in the domain of communal politics.²⁰ The women leaders of the BJP are not daughters, wives, or mothers of deceased male leaders. They are there in their own right and seem to have carved out distinctive political roles and identities for themselves. Equally significant is the articulate and often passionate involvement of women who otherwise seem to have little interest in public life in issues such as reservations, the appeasement of Muslims, or corruption in the bureaucracy. Riots now have a new profile, with women, sometimes even middle-class women, actively participating as in Bhagalpur in 1989, Ahmedabad in 1990, or Surat in 1992. News photographs showed a sizeable number of women among those arriving

²⁰ Tanika Sarkar, 'The Woman as Communal Subject: Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ram Janmabhoomi Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVI: 35 (31 Aug. 1991), p. 2062. Henceforth cited in the text as TS.

for the 1992 Ayodhya *kar seva*. Several papers carried reports of Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati cheering on the crowd that tore down the Babri Masjid.

More striking—and in some ways more disturbing—than the appearance of this militant individual on the public battlefields of Hindutva is her modernity and indeed her feminism. The new Hindu woman nearly always belongs to the most conservative groups in Indian society—upper-class/caste, middle-ranking government service or trading sectors—but she cannot be regarded as traditional in any simple sense of the term, any more than Hindutva can be read as fundamentalist.²¹ There is very little talk of going back to tradition. The focus is on injustice, for which the Babri Masjid serves as symbol. At issue in the war of Hindutva, which is defined after Savarkar as love for the motherland, is not Hinduism, but the Indian nation.

Predictably, self-respect is an important theme. However, hitched into women's aspirations for self-respect is the idea of Hindu self-respect. One account of the origin of the Samiti is that Lakshmibai Kelkar founded it after she saw *goondas* (interestingly not Muslims) raping a woman in the presence of her husband. Since Hindu men (who are in this story both lustful and weak) could not protect their wives, Hindu women had to train to do so themselves (TS 2061). As in authoritarian politics the world over, the emphasis is on discipline and on purging or cleansing the social body of corruption, using force if necessary. While the immediate object appears to be Indian society, the Muslim enemy is very close to the surface here. In the RSS/VHP/BJP imaginary, the *matrabhumi* is presented as a repeatedly raped female body and the myth of the enemy within and of Muslim lust play key structural roles. Thus, for Muslims '*aurat matrabhumi nahin hai, bhog bhumi hai*' (Woman is not the motherland, but the earth to be enjoyed).²² The violence women experience and their need to fight against and gain respect within their own society is all but obscured as the well-made enemy steps in, suggesting that self-respect is best gained in the protection of the motherland. The fact that in the projected Hindu

²¹ Each one of the office-bearers of the Rashtrasevika Samiti, Tanika Sarkar points out, denounced sati. What about voluntary sati? 'A young activist said with genuine revulsion: *Woh ho nahin sakta. Aurat jalengi kyon?*' (That can never happen. Why would a woman burn herself?) Shakra members do not use their caste names and everybody eats together. The Samiti is not against inter-caste or even inter-community marriage—provided the families agree (*ibid.*).

²² Pradip Datta, Biswamoy Pati, et al., 'Understanding Communal Violence: Nizamuddin Riots', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXV: 45 (10 Nov. 1990), p. 2494.

rashtra Muslims would not be allowed four wives was regarded by *kar-sevikas* at Ayodhya as index of the respect women would receive in that utopia (TS 2062).

Like the anti-Mandal agitation, Hindutva would seem to have enabled an articulate, fighting individualism for women and for men. Its power is productive in the Foucauldian sense, inciting its subjects to speak out and act, to become independent, agentive, citizen-individuals. One notices increasingly the confident exponents of Hindutva (students, otherwise unremarkable middle-class men and women) who intervene at seminars and public meetings. These subjects are marked as authentically Indian and as having found an ethos within which their natural—and national—expressive selves can emerge and be sustained.

It is important to understand that though this new Hindu self is represented as discriminated against and embattled, it has the confidence of occupying a 'neutral' ground that provides the basis for a new moral authority. Hindutva, for example, is represented as a potential national ethos within which all other religions and communities might be justly housed. The claim is commonly backed by two arguments. One, a re-deployment of nationalist versions of Indian history in which Hinduism is represented as having a long tradition of tolerance; the other an invocation of Western nation-states and their endorsement of dominant religious traditions in the secularism they practice. The history of violence through which those national bourgeois established authority is never discussed. The new Hindu subject speaks the voice of a reason that opposes false dogmas (such as Western theories, pseudo-secularism), challenges the bias of existing institutions (the courts, the constitution) on the ground that they are not sensitive to the desires of the majority and appeals to truths that are self-evident to genuine Indians. Thus Girilal Jain writes about the 'bloated rhetoric of secularism, constitutionalism and the law' (*Times of India*, 12 Dec. 1992), while Swapan Dasgupta comments after the demolition of the Masjid:

In effect the *kar-sevaks* presented Hindu society with a *fait accompli*. They could either disown the illegal act on account of both politics and aesthetics. Or they could come to terms with their own assertiveness, equate it with the storming of the Bastille and the collapse of the *ancient regime*, and prepare to face the consequences. [*Sunday*, 20–6 Dec. 1992, p. 9.]

In moves that are surprisingly quickly effected and apparently hold conviction for increasingly large numbers of Indians, the virulent anti-Muslim history of Hindutva, a political agenda focused on pulling down a mosque

and building a temple, and a record of communal violence, is gilded over and legitimized as Hindutva reoccupies the discourses in which bourgeois nationalism established authority in its European birthplace—and, more important from the point of view of our argument in this chapter, the forms of subjectivity that emerged in tandem with it. Thus L.K. Advani (invariably represented in the press as mature, soft-spoken, and charming) insists that his is actually the only 'secular' party. The demolition of the Babri Masjid is only a 'temporary setback'. A.B. Vajpayee (honourable, reasonable, cultured) exonerates the real BJP by locating communalism only in its 'young and overenthusiastic party workers' (*Indian Express*, 26 Dec. 1992).²³ The angle on neutrality that appears in the context of the gender question is more telling. Members of the Rashtrasevika Samiti distinguished their position from that of other women's organizations by saying, 'when we arbitrate we do not always take the woman's side. We are neutral. . . . *Hum ghar torne-wale nahin hain.*' (We are not home-breakers) (TS 2062). Similar evidence of 'neutrality' in relation to caste or class is not difficult to locate.

The politics of this neutrality-effect demands closer scrutiny. The BJP/VHP/RSS combine are pressing in on a whole set of existing figures, logics, and institutions as they lay claim to the nation and to neutrality. As their allusions to European history and to first world nationalism also indicate, a figure that is repeatedly referenced is the bourgeois citizen-subject and the world that was 'legitimately'—and ruthlessly—recast in his interests and in his singular image. Closer home is the neutrality of the Nehruvian state and of planned development in which the 'social' problems of caste, class, and gender, and colonialism are addressed and analysed by scientific planners and handed over to the bureaucracy for redress. The problem, briefly summarized, is that though this state acknowledges social disbalances and accepts responsibility for righting them, it functions on the basis of an executive centrality in which the state is authorized to speak and act for the people. It is becoming increasingly clear that the task of shaping this executive centrality and a social imaginary that authorized it, dominated cultural politics in the immediate post-Independence period. Identities that had taken shape in major pre-Independence class, caste, and gender struggles, and which might have provided the basis for another social imaginary

²³ The Left Front government in West Bengal distinguished itself at the time of the Bantala and Birati rapes by very similar evasions. See Tanika Sarkar, 'Reflections on the Birati Rape Cases: Gender Ideology in Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVI: 5 (2 Feb. 1991).

of the nation, were fractured and disorganized as they were rewritten into narratives of humanity and citizenship. The task, however, is an ongoing one, for hegemony is continuously under threat. Films, novels, histories, television programmes, the press in general, the curricula, and a range of their institutions of civil society address potentially rupturing questions of caste, gender or community and rework them into narratives that legitimate the middle-class, upper-caste Hindu, patriarchal and internationalist markings of the hegemonic subject.

As a result of this alliance with the subject of humanism, the common sense of the new Right has a much greater hold than the formal/electoral support received by the BJP might suggest. Thus, whether one looks at the mainstream press or at the apparently non-political programmes put out by Doordarshan (the morning chat shows, the evening serials, the children's programmes, the afternoon women's programmes), or ways of thinking, feeling, reasoning, and arriving at conclusions that govern the daily lives of the growing consumer population, Hindutva seems well set to becoming hegemonic. Powerful new discursive articulations are thus effected between this individualism and organic-conservative themes of religion, tradition, nation, family, personal integrity, order, and discipline. The discussion on minorityism, injury/appeasement, pseudo-secularism, and nationalism have brought these subjects into focus in a virulently anti-Muslim frame and as it feeds directly into a genealogy of modern Indian womanhood that marks it not only as Hindu, but as upper caste/class, the Muslim woman is caught in a curious zero-zero game. Either way she loses. She cannot really be woman any more that she can be Indian. As woman and as Indian, she cannot really be Muslim. As for the women on the Right, they are indeed empowered by these new movements, but in a way that sets up the feminist project as one that endorses caste/class hierarchies and the othering of Islam.

VI

We have been arguing that the hegemonic articulation of the gender issue sets up the feminist subject in an antagonistic relationship with, for example, class-caste (Mandal-Chundur), or religious identity (women on the Right), and in such a way as to aid the reabsorption of this subject into consumer capitalism. We now turn to our last metonym, the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh. The various ways in which the movement has been interpreted and 'women' have been represented seem

to work in such a way as to erase and delegitimize earlier feminist initiatives. The process is not a simple one, and we do not claim that we have been able to map all—or even most—of its complicated strategies and effects. Media depictions of the anti-arrack movement annex its initiative into a variety of contemporary discourses about the nation, its women, and the purification of the former by the virtue of the latter. Feminist theory and practice are caught in a curious set of contradictions. The portrayal of the anti-arrack women as the only authentic feminists, paradoxically also involves, (a) a denial that their struggle is concerned specifically with *women's issues*, and (b) a reinscription of it as an anti-feudal struggle, or as a struggle to cleanse the body politic and save the nation. What seems to enable both the denial and the reinscription is the invoking of the anti-arrack woman as the subject of humanism. Interestingly, in terms of the positions offered to the female/feminist subject, there is little to distinguish the articulators of the women's issue in a conservative, high nationalist mode from those who invoke it as part of the class (or specifically anti-feudal) struggle. As these diverse writers seek to separate the anti-arrack movement from historical feminism, they obscure crucial dimensions of the radical egalitarian potential of actually existing feminism. At the same time, they make invisible dimensions of the anti-arrack movement that find resonance with other feminist initiatives.

What are the facets of the anti-arrack struggle that become visible as we contest these dominant representations of it? What implications do they have for contemporary feminist practice and gender theory? We begin with a brief narrative of the movement.

A series of struggles centred around government-backed sales of arrack (*sara* in Telugu) have been taking place over the past decade or so in various regions of Andhra Pradesh. In each region, different local configurations have sustained arrack as an issue; while in the Telengana region and in a few other districts the CPI(M-L) groups have initiated or supported the agitation, in some of the coastal Andhra districts the movement seems to have emerged in conjunction with other events, such as the adult literacy programme. Women all over rural Andhra Pradesh attacked excise department jeeps and police, burned arrack packets, punished arrack sellers, and fined the men who continued to drink. After September 1992 the movement appears to have gathered rapid momentum, spreading from village to village in a manner that no organized political party has been able to predict or control. Since the article which was the basis for this chapter was originally written in December 1992, there have been further developments: the Andhra Pradesh government

announced a ban on arrack in Nellore District from 15 April 1993, and throughout the state from 1 October 1993. The ruling Congress-I claimed the ban as a pro-people initiative on its part. Enormous coloured hoardings depicted the evils of arrack, portrayed smiling rural families freed from the menace, and Chief Minister Vijayabhaskara Reddy gazed benevolently on the scene from gigantic cut-outs towering above the hoardings, which were put up at major intersections in the capital city of Hyderabad.²⁴ The audio-visual publicity machinery of the government ventured into remote areas of Andhra Pradesh to spread propaganda about the need to stop drinking arrack. In the Assembly elections of November 1994, the Congress suffered a major defeat, and the Telugu Desam Party (which had earlier introduced the government-sponsored distribution of arrack) returned to power. The new Chief Minister, N.T. Rama Rao, declared within minutes of taking office that prohibition of all liquor would immediately come into force in the state. He was only acceding, he said, to the demand of the sisters who had voted for him.

Each political organization, however, seemed to appropriate the *sara* women, laying claim to their struggle, and configuring them as the true subjects of feminism. The range is an astonishing one: from the Gandhians to the Lohiaites to the Telugu Desam to the BJP/RSS; from the Marxist-Leninist parties to the traditional Left (CPM and CPI) to the Dalit Mahasabha; not to mention women's organizations across the spectrum: from the Arya Mahila Samiti to the socialist Mahila Dakshata Samiti, from the A.P. Mahila Sangham to the two Progressive Organizations for Women backed by different M-L parties. The woman in the anti-arrack struggle appeared as a Romantic subject, and predicated onto her were an assortment of complex narratives of which she was sole heroine.²⁵

The BJP MP, Uma Bharati, praising the anti-arrack women, wanted 'women' 'also [to] campaign against dowry, craze for foreign goods and corruption'; she felt they should 'help create national awakening (*swadeshi jagran*)' (*The Hindu*, 20 Oct. 1992). The BJP in Nellore District where the movement was very strong are said to have named the women as Shakti, Kali, and Durga, just as the all-India vice-president of the BJP, Jana Krishnamurthy, declared that '*matru shakti* [mother's strength, power] had

²⁴ Government Order (G.O.) No. 402 dated 24 April 1993. Announcing the ban, Vijayabhaskara Reddy said that total prohibition was the 'policy of the Congress Party right from the start' and the ban had nothing to do with the crusade launched by the Telugu Desam.

²⁵ They use the word 'Romantic' as shorthand for the free, agentive, expressive, spontaneous rebel subject typical of the nineteenth-century literary-cultural movement of Romanticism.

caused others to fall in line' (*The Hindu*, 12 Oct. 1992). Taking a slightly different but related stand, Dalitbahujan theorist K. Ilaiah spoke of the movement as asserting 'the mother's right to set the family right'.²⁶ Vavilala Gopalakrishnaiah, an elderly freedom fighter, argued that the anti-arrack movement was 'similar to the freedom movement' and that 'care should be taken to see that it will not be politicized' (*The Hindu*, 16 Oct. 1992).²⁷ 'Mothers with babies in their arms walk miles to come for demonstrations, wrote Vimala of the POW (*Nalupu*, 1-31 Oct. 1992). The imagery was that of woman 'who has come out into the street [*veedhiloki vacchindi*]' (film actress Sharada, in *Eenadu*, 5 Oct. 1992); and, as in the anti-Mandal agitation, or in the nationalist movement, this woman became the icon of purity and idealism.

In trying to explain why women were out on the streets, writers seem to obscure many factors that might have enabled the rebellion to find articulation, such as the withdrawal of the rice subsidy, the carefully planned increase in arrack sales, the literacy classes and the stories about arrack in the literacy primers. What is offered instead is the picture of the village woman's eternal tears and suffering, and how *sara* 'sucks the blood of the poor' (*Nalupu*, 1-31 Oct. 1992). When driven to extreme despair, suggest the dominant narratives, the woman's human essence asserts itself and allows her to claim the status of citizen-subject.²⁸ Interestingly, the assertion of her 'civility' is premised on her being wife and mother, on her concern for her children and husband. What the woman desires, as Sharada would have it, is 'happiness in the family' (*Eenadu*, 5 Oct. 1992) and that the auspicious marks of her marriage (*paspukumkumam*) not be taken from her. This refiguring of the authentic subject of feminism seems to be an implicit critique, for example, of urban feminists as they are customarily imagined in the dominant cultural representations of our time. This authentic feminist subject is characterized by a retired judge as a rural woman with 'a specific nature of her own'; 'she lives as a slave to custom as long as she can, and when she cannot tolerate that life any more and begins to break barriers, neither men nor the urban women can imagine the manner in which she will struggle. She has nerve' (Justice

²⁶ K. Ilaiah, 'Andhra Pradesh's Anti-Liquor Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVII: 43 (1992), p. 2408.

²⁷ There are interesting parallels with the anti-Mandal agitation, which many intellectuals acclaimed as a manifestation of nationalism, at the same time warning against any attempt to 'politicize' it.

²⁸ 'The tears of thousands of families are pushing them into the struggle', says the actress Sharada (*Eenadu*, 5 Oct. 1992).

Arula Sambasiva Rao, in *Eenadu*, 6 Oct. 1992). The woman's militancy is coded as that spirit which makes her a good wife and mother; the true sati demonstrates her *paativratya* or devotion not by being passive but by acting aggressively to save her husband from an untimely death.

By emphasizing the 'familial' impulse behind women's militancy, dominant explanatory narratives deny the status of the *political* to their actions and seek to contain their scope. A celebratory report in *Indian Express* (13 Oct. 1992) described the anti-arrack issue as 'a burning social question'; N.T. Rama Rao of the Telugu Desam Party invoked the memory of Gandhi's desire to impose prohibition and his (Gandhi's) opinion that 'only womenfolk could bring about this social change' (*Indian Express*, 15 Oct. 1992). Ramoji Rao, editor and publisher of *Eenadu* Telugu daily that gave extensive coverage to the *sara* struggle, said: 'Every individual who keeps trust in the values of social life should wholeheartedly welcome the Great Movement [*Mahodyamam*]. . . . Everybody with flesh and blood, who has a sense of shame, and humanism, is cheering the struggle' (*Eenadu* editorial, 25 Oct. 1992). Analysts on the Left seemed to veer between interpreting the movement as one for social reform (personal conversation with CPM members) and seeing it as 'part of the anti-feudal struggle' (*Nahupu*, 1–15 Nov. 1992). That the movement was perceived by some as 'leaderless' helped to push towards a characterization of it as 'non-political'. As Ramoji Rao put it in an editorial, the movement had 'transcended caste, religion, class and party' although after it had gathered momentum various 'political parties and women's organizations are now hurrying after it' (*Eenadu* editorial, 13 Sept. 1992).

The obverse of the refusal to image the women as political actors is the bestowal on them of a social role, that of rescuing not only their families but also 'saving the nation'. The hegemonic narratives authorize the women, give them 'moral authority' to *cleanse* a body politic 'stinking of *sara*' (*Eenadu* editorial, 13 Sept. 1992). Once again, the consensus in terms of analysis and solution is stunning. Across the political spectrum, writers set up an elaborate demonology in which the valiant women battle the forces of evil, represented by the politicians, the arrack contractors, government officials, industrialists, and the whole 'corrupt' apparatus of state and civil society.²⁹ The meaning of *sara* (K. Balagopal calls it the 'obscene fluid') here becomes that which is unnameable and disgusting beyond belief, stands for the 'uncivilized politics'³⁰ abhorred

²⁹ See, for instance, civil liberties activist K. Balagopal's 'Slaying of a Spirituous Demon', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXVII 46 (1992), pp. 2457–61.

³⁰ The phrase is from the AP Civil Liberties Committee press statement, issued

by the enlightened secular humanist. Repeatedly, *sara* is evoked not only as being 'responsible for all the violence and atrocities on women' (Suman Krishna Kant, Mahila Dakshata Samiti chair, in *Eenadu*, 3 Oct. 1992) but also as signifying the source of all evil and corruption; and it is rural women who are 'blowing the conch-shell of battle to destroy the atrocious *sara* demon' (*Eenadu* editorial, 25 Oct. 1992). As K. Balagopal puts it, 'The supreme courage and tenacity of thousands of rural women has pitted itself against the abysmal humbug of the state's rulers . . . [and the women] have taken up sickle and broomstick to drive the obscenity out of all our lives' (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 Nov. 1992, p. 2457). The anti-arrack movement will 'cleanse us of corruption' (A CPM supporter, in personal conversation); a polity that has fallen away from the idealistic days of nationalism will have its moral impurity washed away by the *sara* women.

What other readings might be possible both of the problem and the struggle? We would want to contest the dominant representations, for example, by suggesting that the *sara* movement is a significant elaboration of the politics of everyday life, and that in such a reading questions of gender, class, caste, and community come into a radically different configuration, where the emphasis shifts from moral purity to economic exploitation or the aspiration for physical well-being.

The observations that follow, necessarily impressionistic, are based on our visit to twelve villages in three *mandals* of Nellore District in November 1992.³¹ While the women's success in reducing or even preventing arrack sales directly affected the State and can be seen without much effort as a 'political' action, the movement also seemed to have resulted in a reconfiguring of power—and gender relations—within villages. Women did not usually confront individual men in their homes but attacked the local *sara* shop and the excise jeeps that supply liquor. The women also seemed to articulate many domains of their life in political terms or as political issues (even areas that class analysis would see as 'economic'). As Kondamma of Thotlacheruvupalli put it: 'Why does the government send us *sara*? Let them give us water instead, and we could have two crops a year. Now we have nothing.' Commenting on the State's indifference to their lives, she pointed out that while they had 'home delivery'

by K.G. Kannabiran and K. Balagopal (*Eenadu*, 18 Sept. 1992).

³¹ We were part of a team sent to Nellore by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad. Our account of the movement draws heavily on the Anveshi report of the visit.

of arrack they had to go nearly twenty miles to the nearest town to treat a simple case of diarrhoea. In this village (Udaygiri Mandal, Nellore District), the women had pulled down the arrack shop and collected donations to build a stone platform over it which they used for public meetings. 'Why should we care', said Kondamma, 'if the government is losing money on *sara* because of us. When they had profits, did we see any of it? If the government has losses, let them cut *your* salaries.' Marvelling at the state's obtuseness, she remarked: 'You should feed a buffalo before you milk it, otherwise it'll kick. And we've kicked.' 'This year we won't vote for anyone', she continued. 'They're all the same. And if our men want to vote, there'll be war between us.'

Other women, in the village of Kacheridevarayapalli (Anantsagar Mandal, Nellore District), drew up a figurative balance sheet that assigned a different set of meanings to *sara*. The cost of the government's Rs 850 crores of excise revenue was death (caused by the men's drunkenness—the deaths were those of themselves as well as of the women, the latter often suicides), hunger, ill-health, lack of education for the children, constant debt, their belongings—all the pots and pans and all their clothes—pawned for buying *sara*, their mental anguish. When they got rid of *sara*, said the women, they began to eat twice a day, the village streets were clean ('no drunks vomiting all over the place'), everyone's health improved ('the men are getting fat and contented'), they had peace of mind ('*ippudu manasushanti undi*'), freedom from abuse, and solvency. The village landlords expressed the fear that labourers who had stopped drinking *sara* and were now able to save a little would not come to them for loans. Agricultural wages would now have to be paid in real money rather than partly in packets of *sara* obtained at a discount. Women's growing control over wages was beginning to undermine long-standing structures of dependency. What is seldom noted in the celebratory accounts of the origin-stories of the anti-arrack movement is the Congress government's withdrawal of the rice subsidy for low-income families. The movement could be seen then as a critique, in a sense, not only of the State but also of the priorities of the globalizing economy, and the effects on everyday life of structural adjustment and the contemporary reorganization of markets.

Many of the women in the movement spoke of the significance education, or literacy, has for them. One of the stories we heard about the beginnings of the movement was about an inaugural function in Ayyavaripalli village for the government-initiated Akshara Deepam programme designed to eradicate illiteracy. The function, attended by a State Cabinet

Minister and the District Collector, was disrupted by some drunken men. The women of the village, as in all other villages the only ones who attended the night classes, demanded the closure of the local *sara* shop so that their classes could be held in peace. Willing to promise anything to ensure the success of the literacy programme, the officials complied. This and other narratives about women's achievements were written into the post-literacy primers; stories such as the one about Dubagunta village ('*Adavallu Ekamaithe*'—If Women Unite) where three drunken labourers lost their way and drowned in a tank. A hundred women first stopped the local arrack cart from entering the village; then they turned back 'a jeep full of *sara* packets'; after this, the lesson goes, the police arrived to enforce the right of the contractor to sell arrack. The women stood their ground, saying they would go to the Collector if necessary. 'This year', the lesson concludes, 'no one came forward to bid for arrack in our village'.³² Women also spoke of other lessons, charts, and topics for discussion in their literacy primers, such as 'Seethamma Katha', 'Unity', and 'Who's Responsible for this Death?', which inspired them to join the struggle against arrack. 'We want our children to go to school', said Kondamma of Thotlacheruvupalli. This claiming from below of the right to education makes evident one of the most important agendas of the anti-Mandal agitation, the denial of education to the lower castes.³³ The upper-caste anxiety about educated Dalits, as in Chunduru, is to prevent them from occupying the space of the modern as it has been marked out in the post-colonial nation. The *sara* women's claiming of education seemed to recognize this logic and challenge the exclusions of modernity itself. The Dalit and Muslim women engaged in the struggle seemed to be articulating a claim on the rights of the citizen, from a critical perspective not necessarily predicated on their 'human essence'.

In spite of the fact that the women in the movement were predominantly from the Scheduled Caste, Backward Caste, and Muslim communities, their jointly undertaken efforts to stop the excise officials received the tacit support of the upper-caste women of their village. Although it is an understanding obtained from the women's perspective that allowed them to claim *sara* as 'their' issue, the movement seldom pitted them against individual men, or against women from other castes/communities.

³² Chaduvu Velugu and Akshara Deepam literacy primers. We are grateful to T.S.S. Lakshmi and K. Sajaya for providing translations of the lessons.

³³ A popular anti-Mandal refrain was that educational opportunities for lower caste people would wean them away from their traditional occupations, turn them into clerks, and thereby destroy the handicrafts and textiles that symbolized Indian culture.

A unique feature of the anti-arrack movement was the refusal of the women to take up initiatives beyond their village. As Mastan-bi of Kacheridevarayapalli put it, 'Are the women of the other villages dead? Why should *we* go there to fight against *sara*?' In relating their initiatives to the specificity of their location (their slogan is *Maa ooriki sara vaddu*—'We don't want *sara* in our village'), in demarcating a domain over which they can exercise control, the anti-arrack women seem to be envisaged, and engaged, in a politics of the possible.³⁴

VII

It seems to us that the early 1990s represent a turning point for Indian feminism. Each of the metonyms we have chosen for analysis focus on hegemonic mobilizations of a 'feminist' subject specific to our times. Each displays the contradictions that emerge within feminist politics and the challenges that confront gender analysis in the context of the refiguring of dominance in a rapidly globalizing Indian economy. Clearly the metonyms evidence an undertow in existing Indian feminism of structures of domination. Yet the anti-Mandal agitation, the politics of contraceptive choice, the feminism of the Hindu Right, or the representations of the anti-arrack movement provide us also with configurations that crystallize and precipitate the possibilities of new and more radical alliances. This chapter has been primarily concerned with the exploration of factors that disable alliances between feminism and other democratic political initiatives, but we regard this as a crucial first step in the shaping of a feminism capable of a counter-hegemonic politics adequate to our times.

It is possible that in this essay this concern has not allowed us to focus richly enough on the democratic potential of actually existing feminism. Yet it is clearly this potential that both demands and empowers the kind of critical engagement evident in our argument. It is also precisely this democratic potential that has enabled us as feminists to support Dalit movements or take part in anti-communal initiatives today. By confronting the specific genealogy of the woman-subject and its impress on contemporary politics, we have tried also to open up for investigation the subject of democracy-secularism in India.

³⁴ We take this phrase from Kumkum Sangari's well-known article, 'The Politics of the Possible', reprinted in Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar (eds), *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India* (Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993).