A question of identity

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THE truism that the women’s movement is about women continues to hold. And yet, the task of speaking for and about women in this present moment represents an entirely new challenge for the women’s movement in India. Unique to the present situation is the fact that identity issues have assumed a critical position in contemporary politics. These issues have in fact impacted on the women’s question as well, so much so that within the space of the past decade and a half, the seeming coherence of the woman category has come to be debated within the movement itself.

The public discussions around the Shah Bano case, Roop Kanwar’s sati, Mandal agitation, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the protests against the screening of Fire and the ongoing debate on the Women’s Reservation Bill have, each in their own way, pushed for redefinition and clarification of the subject of feminism. The context for articulating the politics of feminism is, in each of these cases, provided by issues raised by different groups that have emphasised one particular identity. Strikingly, though these moments have been experienced as one of crisis for the women’s movement, feminist rethinking within a force field dominated by questions of identity equally offers the possibility of fresh beginnings for the women’s movement and its politics.

Even as it is true that the significations of ‘identity’ have acquired new force in recent times, it needs to be clarified that the question of identity per se is not new to the women’s movement. On the contrary, the issue of identity, though not posed in these precise terms, has been central all along to the self-conception of the women’s movement. In fact, the impetus for feminist politics has, for the most part, been its resistance to ‘the oppressiveness of identity, of having to be a sexed being all the time’ (Dhareshwar 1993: 124).

However, feminist theory and politics have had to work within a paradox – of simultaneously denying the excess of identity attributed to women while also at the same time articulating a non-conventional identity based on the fact of being ‘woman’. One
gesture has always called into being the other as well. The campaigns against rape and violence in the 1970s for instance, though not self-consciously coded as identity issues, represent some of the early attempts within the movement to think through this paradox of women’s identity, of refiguring in effect women’s embodied identities.

In contrast to the longer history of the term ‘identity’, ‘identity politics’ has a more recent use. Within India, and remarkably the world over as well, the concept of ‘identity politics’ acquired currency mainly in the late ’80s and the early ’90s in the context of assertions of a range of identities, specifically identities that sought to naturalise certain cultural characteristics.

Valentine Moghadam points to this global dimension of identity politics and the range of issues covered by it: ‘During the 1980s, discourses and movements centred on issues of identity erupted around the world with considerable force. Questions of cultural, religious, national, linguistic, and sexual identity commanded centre stage, relegating questions of economic justice, at least temporarily, to the background... The phenomenon of identity formation is not unique to a specific geographic area’ (emphasis mine, 1994: 3).

Notably, this formulation places ‘the phenomenon of identity formation’ exclusively in the cultural realm and distinct moreover from the economic. Mary John marks a similar distinction between the cultural and the economic when she characterizes the activities of the women’s movement in India: ‘Whereas the ’70s gave the women’s movement its first initiatives in the area of economic development, culminating in distinct “autonomous” analyses of patriarchy, the ’80s witnessed an onrush of cultural problems none were prepared for – the anti-Sikh riots, the Shah Bano controversy and Roop Kanwar’s sati, continuing into the ’90s with Mandal and Ayodhya’ (emphasis mine, 1996: 26).

While it is now an accepted fact that the process of identity formation takes place in the cultural realm, the implications of this formulation need to be further examined, especially given that both the terms, ‘identity’ and ‘identity politics’, have acquired a new charge in the last couple of decades. It is important, moreover, to note that the significations of these terms are increasingly getting fixed within certain frames. This has had the effect of suppressing their other histories and trajectories.

For instance, in this present moment of theorisation in India, it is the question of communalism which is being foregrounded in the discussions about identity. This predominant strand within the thinking of the women’s movement is evident, for instance, in the grid defined by Jana Everett for analyzing the relationship between gender and identity politics. This frame is indicative of the
contemporary contexts which have shaped much of feminist theorization of identity politics in India. According to Everett, 'The upsurge of fundamentalism and communal violence in India over the past decade has led feminist scholars to analyse the interrelationships among the state, identity politics and gender' (emphasis mine, 2001: 2071). This assessment names one context, i.e. fundamentalism and communal violence, and accordingly describes the problem of identity politics. However, tracking the two terms – identity and identity politics – along different axis would, predictably enough, yield different insights.

But in the first instance, how do we understand the term ‘identity’? And what does the term ‘identity politics’ indicate? Among the meanings that the Oxford dictionary attributes to the word ‘identity’, the closest to common usage in the present time are those given as ‘the quality or condition of being the same; the absolute or essential sameness, oneness... individuality, personality... The condition of being identified in feeling, interest, etc.’ This elaboration of the term perhaps derives from the discipline of psychoanalysis where the problem of ‘identity’ has long been the focus of many discussions and debates.

Drawing upon the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s theories, Sudhir Kakar explains the concept in an article titled ‘The Psychological Origins’ included in an issue of Seminar on the theme of identity. According to Kakar, ‘identity is used in the sense of a person’s experience of self-sameness and continuity in time and space which is contingent on its continued recognition and reinforcement by his or her significant social group’ (emphasis in original, p. 16).

However, as opposed to this school of thought, Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis foreground, not the sameness or continuity of a person’s experience, but the notion of lack implicit in the term – lack experienced while attempting to maintain continuity. Stuart Hall for instance emphasizes this aspect when he argues that ‘[I]dentities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always "knowing" (the language of consciousness betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a "lack"...’ (1996: 6).

As in the discipline of psycho-analysis, the question of identity is a forceful presence, especially in recent times, in political theory as well. Interestingly, political theory has had to develop its tools afresh in order to engage with the notion of political identities. Ernesto Laclau explains this imperative in terms of the ‘emergence of a plurality of new subjects that have escaped the classical political frameworks and, in this way, have put new challenges to political practice and political theory...’ (1994: 4). The field of political theory is, therefore, now witness to discussions about multiculturalism, about the tension between the language of rights on the one hand and assertions of identity on the other, about social
and legal entitlements, and so on.

The predicament of feminist theory today is similar to the one faced by political theory. In the sense that its frameworks too have not, until now, tried to account for how women’s identities are formed and what they signify. Importantly, however, feminist theorization in India has recognized the value of understanding the processes by which women become the sites for the constitution of group identities. As Mary John points out in relation to the studies included in *Recasting Women*, ‘...the study of the colonial period proved to be such a crucial turning point for an Indian feminist politics, in having made concertedly visible a "cultural" nationalism wherein the underbelly of every attempt towards identity has been a redescription of women of different classes’ (1995: 24).

This historical reconstruction of the ‘woman question’ has led to a closer examination of the implications of identity politics for the women’s movement. The role of the state and the legal structures in producing and strengthening identity politics too has been examined. However, an assessment of the growth and impact of the identity movements from a woman-centred perspective, has resulted in the rejection of identity politics. Most feminist studies of identity politics have found a recurring pattern through which identity based politics consolidates itself. They have pointed out that identity politics repudiates women’s agency and fixes women’s roles and responsibilities in a manner that is at complete odds with feminist objectives.

This evaluation, in particular, has resulted in a wholesale condemnation of identity politics by the women’s movement. Zoya Hasan, for instance, points out, ‘In the final analysis, the reaffirmation of religio-cultural distinctions constricts the articulation of gender interests within the terms of reference set by a specific communitarian discourse, and whatever rights may have been achieved in earlier political moments are sacrificed in the interests of identity politics’ (1994: xiv). Clearly then, in this formulation, identity politics is described as being totally incompatible with feminist goals. Identity politics is here pitted against feminist politics, shutting out the possibility of understanding identity politics and, more importantly, feminist politics itself, differently.

This rather predominant strand of thinking within the women’s movement is illustrated in two recent studies. The first, *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* edited by Valentine Moghadam is a collection of essays on identity politics in various parts of the world, including India. In her introduction to the work, Moghadam uses the term identity politics to refer to “discourses and movements organized around questions of religious, ethnic, and national
In Moghadam’s analysis, the term ‘identity politics’ is overlaid with negative connotations since it is understood to obstruct women’s access to her rights. Following from this understanding, Moghadam concludes that it is possible to insist on women’s rights only when the ‘woman’ identity is separated from other identities. According to her, “In the place of particularist rhetorics and exclusivist concepts of identity, the United Nations "universal declarations" on human rights and the convention on women provide a powerful rhetorical and political point of departure. ...One answer to identity politics which seeks to control women is to disarticulate "woman" from "culture", deconstruct woman as symbol, reconstruct women as human beings, and problematize women’s rights as human rights” (1994: 22).

This solution is obviously premised on the belief that a woman’s identity and her rights can be disassociated from the religious, ethnic, national or cultural context of her existence. And that these contexts do not shape her identity as a woman. It overlooks the fact that it is in the realm of the cultural that a ‘woman’ exists and it is in the realm of the cultural that alternate and feminist identities are sought to be constructed.

Forging Identities: Gender Communities and the State edited by Zoya Hasan, also takes a very critical view of identity politics and the kind of impact it has on feminist struggles. The thrust of the argument of most of the essays in the book is that in its present formulation community identity works against women. Most of the essays demonstrate, through the research they carry out on the ground that ‘identity assertions subordinate women’s material interests’ (Hasan, 1994: x). The women’s movement has time and again foregrounded this dimension of identity politics and this is indeed cause for concern.

However, it also needs to be pointed out that feminist attempts to analyse identity politics has been largely limited to understanding how communities have constructed their identities by defining and fixing the identities of women. Within these analyses moreover, religion and caste are seen as premodern and in that sense not part of a ‘modern’ feminist identity. It becomes increasingly clear in the formulations of the kind that Hasan and Moghadam advance that class, caste, region, and language are kinds of identity but that ‘woman’ is not an identity.

This moment of engagement with the identity question is in significant ways being shaped by a contradiction. The contradiction is contained in the fact that the women’s movement is facing its most difficult challenge on the very grounds on which it has sought to establish its validity. In other words the women’s question, which
represented one form of identity politics, is now confronted by the politics of other identity movements. The response to this challenge has in part been to insist on the homogeneity of women’s identity when assessing the politics of these other movements.

Different identity movements are indeed patriarchal. But the question for feminist politics really is: Is patriarchy the only lens through which to view women’s identity? A focus on the study of constitution and reconstitution of patriarchy does not necessarily give a complete picture of the formation of women’s identity. The women’s movement has to find other ways of engaging with identity movements rather than focus only on the patriarchal dimension of the movements and denounce them.

Bell Hooks argues the similar point differently: ‘I think that the recent rise in religious fundamentalism has produced a context for the resurgence of totalizing claims. It’s both interesting and dangerous that we find this totalizing happening in radical or liberal spaces where we’ve seen major challenges to those claims. Feminism is a prime example of this. Who would have thought that after all of the interventions calling for a recognition of race, gender, and class that we would have people coming back and positing a more monolithic sense of women’s identity. This is very dangerous for the future of radical and revolutionary feminist movements’ (1995: 116).

It is interesting also to note that not in all issues where identity is recognised as a relevant feature, has it become contentious for the women’s movement. A case in point relates to the reservations for women within panchayati raj. Here the multiple identities of women have registered in the analyses of the system and its functioning (cf. Bishakha Dutta). Significantly though, no contestation is read among the different identities of women. And as long as the distinct identities feed into the recognisable frameworks of oppression and resistance, feminist theory has not faced any problem. Its real challenge has been when particular identities have contradicted the notion of the secular subject of feminism.

The secular subject of feminism is one that is perhaps marked by identities of class, caste, region, religion or sexuality but for whom these identities are incidental to the primary and originary fact of being woman. A significant part of the analyses emerging from within the women’s movement is premised on the separation of the woman’s identity as a woman from that as a member of a minority grouping or any other identity in order to describe women’s oppression. For instance, if pressed to explain causality, most responses to the rape of a dalit woman by an upper caste male would attribute it to the primary fact that the person raped is a woman and only secondarily to the fact that she is dalit.

Insisting on causal priority may not, in itself, explain anything.
However, it is important to note that it is the dalit movement which has established the rape of a dalit woman as rape. The sexual access to women from the dominated castes, which was earlier regarded as the right of the dominant castes, has been radically configured by dalit politics and named as rape. Not only has this understanding forced a reconceptualisation of the humanist and feminist presumptions about the subject of rape but it has in very significant ways redefined dalit politics itself.

Obviously though, this politics needs to be taken further. The two identity movements – the dalit movement and the women’s movement – need to engage with each other’s politics. The fact that this is not happening is evident in Vimal Thorat’s comment, ‘Both the dalit movement and the women’s movement have consciously ignored the dalit women’s issue ...We have been kept out, left behind, denied by our own movement (the dalit movement) and also by the women’s movement’ (emphasis mine p. 12). The indictment is in the accusation that the women’s movement has consciously left out dalit women’s issues. The underlying question again is whether the basis for political action is identity seen as sameness or difference?

It would be instructive at this point to return to the field of psycho-analysis to understand the fact of marginalisation that is built into the process of identity formation. Drawing upon the discussions of identity, Stuart Hall points out that ‘[T]hroughout their careers identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abjected. Every identity has its "margin", an excess, something more’ (emphasis in original, 1996: 5).

Within the Indian context though there is limited discussion of what it entails for a movement politics to accept that identity formation processes operate through exclusions and about the strategies that follow thereupon. The women’s movement has of course already recognised the many and simultaneous identities lived by a woman. It now needs to understand and analyze the dynamics between the several identities that constitute a woman.

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