

COMMUNITY, GENDER AND VIOLENCE

Subaltern Studies XI - (Ed.) Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan, Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal Publisher, Delhi, 2000, 347 pages.

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This volume consists of essays presented at the Fifth Subaltern Studies Conference held in Colombo in June 1995, under the auspices of the Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (Colombo), and the Subaltern Studies Society. The themes of the conference were 'community, gender and violence.' One might have added 'nation and state,' but perhaps that would have made the title too long and unwieldy!

In fact, the very first essay, 'A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India' by Aamir R. Mufti, takes up the theme of the relationship of a minority community (in this case Muslims) to the emerging nation. Contending that the dominant image of 'Mother India' places "the Muslims" in the position of minority, distinct from the sons of the mother even if allied with them' (p.32), Mufti argues that the Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto circumvents this problem by representing the relationship between subject and nation as one between client and prostitute, hinting 'at the possibility of another form of "love" for the nation... -one that is less singular and totalizing, outside the discourse of filial nature, more open to "doubt" and "betrayal"' (p.30).

However, Mufti fails to ask where either of these representations leave women in relation to the nation, given that 'Mother India' is evidently defined in relation to her sons, and Manto's prostitutes have only male clients. The old nationalism, whether in its majority or minority guise, seems to have no place for women as subjects. Not so the 'new nationalism', as Tejaswini Niranjana argues in 'Nationalism Refigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism.' Analysing three of Mani Ratnam's films—*Geetanjali* (1989), *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995)—she shows that while the new nationalism is one in which 'exclusions of caste (the lower castes) and community (the non-Hindu) [are] legitimized' in the name of 'secularism' and 'modernity' (p.140), gender has a key place. The 'woman who chooses, the woman who acts independently, who takes the initiative, are today admired figures in popular cinema' (pp.142-2), yet their love for the nation, rather than being active, is mediated through their assistance to or love for the male hero, who remains the real subject; their main function is to secure 'the complicity of "women" in producing the exclusions of caste and community which enable the formation of the citizen-subject' (p.166). The uncritical patriotism of Mani Ratnam's films, which completely whitewash the role of the state in perpetrating violence against minorities, can be contrasted with a film like *Maachis*, which attempts to come to grips with this reality.

'Embodying the Self: Feminism, Sexual Violence and the Law' by Nivedita Menon takes a critical look at feminist attempts to reform rape law, arguing that 'the binary logic of the law cannot comprehend the complexity of the way sexual experience is constituted' (p.67).

This is a very real problem, as she demonstrates in various examples, and one that is probably insurmountable, in that sexual assault is probably an area in which the law will at best be only a vague approximation to justice. I cannot agree with her conclusion, however, that 'if we work on the belief that it is the idea that makes the body phenomenologically accessible, feminist practice would be liberated from the stranglehold of the discourse that designates the body as the site of selfhood' (p.103), and 'it might be possible then, in the case of sexual violence, to see the feminist project not as one of "justice" but of "emancipation"...from the very meaning of rape' (p.104). While freeing women from patriarchal definitions of rape as a loss of female honour might mitigate the trauma of the *aftermath* of rape, it would hardly make the experience itself more bearable. Male victims of rape are equally traumatised, as Menon herself notes, as are small children. Andrea Dworkin—surely the last person on earth to subscribe to such patriarchal ideologies—in describing an experience of being drugged and raped, implied that what caused the greatest anguish was the virtual impossibility of ever bringing the perpetrator(s) to justice. Conversely, the large number of cases brought up by adult survivors of child abuse testifies to their strong desire that even after so many years, justice *shall* be done.

The self may not be reducible to the body, but we cannot completely disembodify the self either. Attempts to do this—for example, by children who have no means of escape from an abusive situation—can result in severe psychological disorders. We will always experience violence against our bodies as violence against our selves, and so the quest for justice—however imperfect—has to go on. That we cannot rely on the law *alone*, however, is an important point; other strategies are also necessary. I would like to suggest, as one possibility, educating boys always to identify with the victim—an identification so terrifyingly lacking in the young men interviewed by Anand Patwardhan in his film *Father, Son and Holy War*, which makes a bold attempt to trace the links between masculine and communal violence.

The law is also the focus of 'Women, Marriage, and the Subordination of Rights' by Flavia Agnes, who looks at the contentious issue of family laws in India. She shows how the intervention of British jurists during the colonial period both failed to 'comprehend the plurality of the prevailing non-state legal systems and locally evolved practices,' and 'provided a forum for the collusion of local patriarchal interests with the anti-women biases of British jurists.' (p.120) to the detriment of women's rights. Her critique of the 'civilising mission' of colonialism is well substantiated, yet this account seems too simplistic, if we look at some of the legislation that the author herself refers to: the Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829, the Prohibition of Female Infanticide Act of 1872, and the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. Would it be correct to argue that legislation prohibiting such traditional practices (which, in the case of female infanticide and

ild marriage, are widely prevalent even today) was/is detrimental ... women? Looking at the problem as one of enabling women to escape physical and/or mental cruelty in marriage *without* suffering destitution, she is undeniably right to contend that 'any formulation of laws and rights needs to contextualise the economic rights of women' (p.136) if gender-justice is to be achieved. However, her emphasis on 'property' restricts the beneficiaries to women of the propertied classes. For the vast majority of Indian women, equal pay, equal employment opportunities, childcare, social security, education (given that female literacy is only around 35 per cent) and social recognition of their contribution to the marital home through unwaged domestic labour (which would rule out the possibility of their being thrown out, as Shahbanu was, after decades of work sustaining that home) would be more important means of securing gender justice.

These last two essays call attention to the day-to-day masculine violence, all but invisible, often condoned by the courts, which forms the background to highly visible outbursts of communal mayhem. Pradeep Jeganathan's essay, 'A Space for Violence: Anthropology, Politics and the Location of a Sinhala Practice of Masculinity,' looks at an apparent paradox: how can an avowedly non-violent Sinhala Buddhist culture produce eruptions of murderous violence? Is it an aberration, a sudden release, in response to a disturbance of equilibrium, of impulses normally repressed? This is a view taken by prominent anthropologists as well as colonial rulers, but Jeganathan has a different explanation. He examines the practice of *bayanathikama*, literally 'fearlessness,' but carrying the connotation of 'a repertoire of practices that can be learnt, taught and experienced, for example by masculine specialists, such as *chandi* or thugs,' and concludes, 'The practice of fearlessness, I contend, is a practice of masculinity that produces a space for violence in Sinhala society' (p.52).

He declines to go further, arguing that 'what is violence and what is not, is always constituted by politics' (p.64), and that this is 'a limit that marks the end of anthropology and the beginning of the political' (p.65). It is left to Satish Deshpande, in his essay on 'Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: the Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-century India,' to show how the space for violence created by such practices can be manipulated by organised political groups to produce communal bloodbaths. His analysis hinges on the concept of 'heterotopias,' which are real but 'very special kinds of places because...they mediate, in a mirror-like fashion, between utopias and ideological subjects' (p.171). Thus Savarkar, who did more than anyone else to popularise the term *Hindutva* or 'Hindu-ness' (not to be confused with Hinduism), defined 'Hindus' as those for whom India is their holy land, and claimed that 'only those marked by *Hindutva* have the moral-political right to constitute the nation' (p.180). Contemporary *Hindutva* has employed at least three distinct kinds of spatial strategies: those centred on places, areas and routes. The best example of the first is the violent campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid and build a Ram temple in its place; the second is exemplified by the routine neighbourhood activities of organisations like the Shiv Sena and Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the women's wing of the RSS), building up the allegiance of whole families which can be mobilised, when desired, in 'ethnic cleansing' drives; and the third is constituted by processions, whether of national dimensions, like L.K.Advani's *rathiyatra* to Ayodhya, or more local events, like

Ganesh Utsav processions, which can be 'a spectacular and often terrifying demonstration of strength' and which 'offers hospitality and encouragement for... "spontaneous" violence' (p.207).

Deshpande observes that 'The first strategy of nationalism is almost invariably the invention of antiquity, the retroactive projection of a modern nation into an ancient past as timeless as it is perfect,' and that 'This implies the harnessing of time to inflect the meaning of space' (p.175). This is the starting point of Qadri Ismail's essay, 'Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism: The Southern Tamil (Woman) and Separatist Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka.' The first and most important claim he attempts to substantiate is that, 'partly due to its profound and structural dependence on nostalgia, *it is no longer possible to speak of nationalism, in any of its manifestations, as anything but a conservative ideology and politics*' (p.215, emphasis in original). Equally important, perhaps, and reminiscent of the essays by Aamir Mufti and Tejaswini Niranjana, is the claim that '*from a feminist perspective, nationalism—to be precise, the nation—cannot be seen as providing enabling community*' (p.218). He seeks to establish his claims by analysing three key documents of Tamil nationalism—the *Vadukkodai Resolution* of 1976, *Liberation Tigers and Tamil Freedom Struggle* of 1983, and the *Thimpu Declaration* of 1985, and contrasting them with the testimony of two Southern Tamil women survivors of the pogrom of 1983.

A painstaking reading of the three documents shows how Tamil nationalism invents a geography and history for itself while simultaneously excluding various categories: Sinhalese residents of the Northeast, Up-country Tamils, Tamil-speaking Muslims, and even Tamils who belong to the same ethnic group but happen to live outside the area claimed by Tamil nationalism as its homeland. The two women whose testimony is quoted belong to this last category, and reject Tamil nationalism by refusing to migrate to the Northeast, where they would be part of the 'majority,' or to act as patriotic mothers by bringing up their children to have a Tamil identity. One seeks security in avoiding dressing in typical Tamil fashion (with *pottu* and sari) and encouraging her children to speak Sinhala and marry outside the Tamil community, while the other, whose children 'were pestering us to change our name to a less Tamil sounding one,' (p.278), eventually emigrates to New Zealand.

I am strongly reminded of my own interviews with refugees in 1989-90, especially with a group of Tamil women from the North and East in a refugee camp in Colombo. In the course of the discussion, one remarked, 'Since 1958 the old men have been talking and wasting time. Now the young men are taking up arms and wasting time!' (*Journey Without a Destination*, p.42). Another, when I asked 'What do you think of the idea of Tamil Eelam?' joked, 'Everything will be made of palmyrah!' making her companions laugh. As amazing as their ability to be humorous in such dire circumstances is their casual debunking of the wisdom of the 'old men' of the TULF, the heroism of the 'young men' of the LTTE, and the national identity of the Tamil nation-state itself, the clear implication being that none of this is going to solve the pressing problems they face. There were also Tamil women whose Sinhalese husbands had been hacked to death by the LTTE, dozens of young men fleeing forcible conscription by the Tigers, and in London I interviewed others who had fled death threats from the LTTE after having criticised their policies. All these

instances point to the other side of the exclusion practised by ethnic nationalism: the fact that those who are *included* are subjected to a ferociously authoritarian process of domination and homogenisation. It is easy to agree with Ismail 'that nationalism cannot be seen as liberatory or resistant in any emancipatory sense of the term, but that it is exclusionary, oppressive, disabling community' (p.282), and that we therefore need to think of 'the possibility of subverting nationalism and imagining more enabling forms of community' (p.214). However, this still leaves us with the question: what should we do with the nation-state, since it does not seem about to wither away in the near future?

David Scott, in his essay 'Toleration and Historical Traditions of Difference,' replies to this question by proposing the necessity to create conditions 'for Tamils, Sinhala and Muslims to be able to argue within their own discursive traditions about who they are respectively and what they want,' as well as 'to create overlapping public spaces (new overlapping domains of the political) in which these traditions meet, in which disagreement and discord can be voiced, claims and counter-claims negotiated, and accommodations, compromises—i.e. settlements (albeit temporary ones)—arrived at' (p.303). It seems to me that far from resolving the problem of *how* such disputes can be settled (e.g. who would arbitrate in such a set-up, and according to what principles?) this proposal simply creates worse problems. For example, what is to be done in cases where communities practice female infanticide (as some routinely do in India), or harass and sometimes kill young women for dowry or because they choose the 'wrong' (in terms of religion, caste or sex) partner? Should those of us who are outside those communities try to help the victims, or are we expected to adopt a *laissez faire* attitude: that's *their* problem, let them sort it out among themselves? When self-appointed guardians of Sinhala and Tamil identity kill a Vijaya Kumaratunga or Neelan Thiruchelvam (two out of thousands of such victims), is that a purely internal affair of the Sinhala and Tamil communities respectively?

An even more fundamental question is: how far does this picture of distinct and separate 'non-liberal historical communities' (p.304), with distinct and separate identities, correspond with the reality in Sri Lanka? My first encounter with this question was as a child during the 1958 riots, when Menike, the woman who had looked after my brother and me while our parents were at work before we started going to school, organised my family's escape to safety. Seen through the lens of the love between two children and the woman who had cared for them, it was obvious to me that Menike and her baby, whom I adored, were part of 'us,' our community, despite differences of ethnicity and religion, whereas the lumpen mobs were in no way part of *her* community, despite an ostensibly shared 'Sinhala Buddhist' identity. Nothing in my subsequent experience has changed the view that *real* historical communities in Sri Lanka cut across boundaries of religion and language. Even in 1989-90, after so much havoc had taken place, I came across plenty of Tamil refugees who said their closest friends were Sinhalese, Muslim refugees who said their Tamil neighbours were like brothers and sisters to them, mixed couples with unclassifiable children. Indeed, the critique of this notion of separate communities is best summed up in the words of a wise old woman in a Sinhalese refugee camp: 'Look at the situation of all those families where mixed marriages have taken place... They can't find any place

to live together in peace... And what about the Tamil families who are Sinhala-speaking? They too face the same problem... Where can they go? There is no freedom anywhere' (*Journey Without a Destination*, p.57).

I would say that the idea of distinct ethnic communities is a fiction, while real historical communities are far more mixed and complex, and this is precisely why the project of ethnic nationalism requires such horrific violence: it has to tear apart real communities, families, even individuals. Similarly, as feminist critics of communal identity have pointed out, these identities are *forced* on women, often by the threat or use of violence; *real* identities are far more complex and multifaceted. So this proposal amounts to a justification for tearing apart real communities in order to establish fictitious ones, and crushing real identities in order to create forced ones, both by the use of violence. Not a good idea!

Both these last essays would have benefited from a discussion of the notion of universal human and democratic rights: the right to life, freedom from cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment, freedom of movement, association and expression, equal rights and equal opportunities for all, the right to be governed by representatives chosen in free and fair elections, the right to love and live with the partner of one's choice, and so on. While these may not in practice be realisable under capitalism, they are in theory compatible with bourgeois rule, and can therefore legitimately be fought for and at least partially won. Such a struggle would not involve a rejection of Marxism, since, as Marx makes clear in *The Civil War in France*, a working-class government would involve not a negation but a radical extension of such democracy; and it could form a bridge between the fascistic nationalism described by Ismail and more enabling forms of community. If Scott rejects the notion of universal rights, (as Flavia Agnes appears to do when she writes on p.106 that 'the demand for legal equality can no longer be limited to a simple and straightforward task of preparing a *model draft* which ensures uniform rights to women of all communities'), that too should be made clear.

In her 'Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern,' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak does in fact mention democracy, but her discussion is restricted to the parliamentary majoritarianism that has been linked to so much violence in our countries, and therefore does not throw much light on this question. Indeed, the Afterword tends to create confusion rather than clarity about the key issues taken up in the volume. For example, her eulogistic treatment of the notion of *baya-nethikama* in Jeganathan's essay—'There is no decision below the declarative—and no violence greater than the translation of the declarative into performance via the imperative, however implicit or instantaneous. In the untranslatibility of the idiom is the guarantee of the plurality of histories' (p.311)—seems to take little account of the fact that we are dealing with the potential for murderous ethnic violence. Again, her dismissal of the term 'ethnic cleansing' without providing any alternative—'Ethnic *cleansing*... carries with it an aura of pre-Christian sacrificial cultures. It is a mobilization, once again, of the historical use of the argument from normative deviations to justify European intervention' (p.308)—leaves us without words to describe the systematic use of violence to drive Tamils out of Colombo in 1983, Muslims out of Jaffna and the rest of the North in 1990, and Muslims out of Bombay in 1993, since this is clearly

something more than routine communalism, and yet to call it 'genocide' would not be accurate either. In literary criticism, one might applaud one term and decry another without any serious consequences, but in real life there is an ethical dimension involved, especially when the subject is violence.

I would suggest that there are three reasons why the Afterword seems so muddled. One is that the category of 'the subaltern' (e.g. p.319) does not take into account the possibility that someone who is subordinate in one relationship may be dominant—or, indeed, viciously oppressive—in another. In other words, the assumption of a fixed essence of 'subalternity' cannot capture the complexity of real social relations. At points, Spivak seems aware of this, but is unable to formulate the problem clearly. Another reason is the hostility of post-modernism to any form of universalism, which makes it difficult to take ethical positions on issues such as violence, since a universalist

ethics inevitably over-rides particularities of culture and tradition, community and nation, in the name of which most of the violence described in this volume is practised. And thirdly, her language and style might well confuse Spivak herself, apart from mystifying her readers!

To conclude, then: this volume takes up themes that are crucially important in our troubled subcontinent, and, for the most part, examines them in a thought-provoking and challenging fashion; one need not agree with every point in order to gain insights from the essays. Given that the issues are so important, it is unfortunate that the language is occasionally too inaccessible to allow the discussion to reach as wide a readership as it otherwise might. For those who are willing to make the effort, however, the rewards are substantial.

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TALES OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS

Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled*

Chandra Chari

“I disturbed the clear still surface of my life long ago. Now I watch as the ripples fuse one into another, creating new ones, which spread and spread. Inextricably interrelated. I let the moments pass.”

Chandani Lokuge, a Sri Lankan based in Australia, teaches English in the University of Adelaide. Her short have been widely anthologized. *If the Moon Smiled* is her first novel. In telling the tale of an ordinary life of exile and alienation of the body and spirit, Chandani has succeeded in crafting a small little masterpiece. The magic holds, gossamer like, every step of the way.

At the centre of the novel stands Manthiri, delicate, sensitive, so like the *araliya* flower of the white-gold petals, enjoying an idyllic childhood, surrounded by parental adoration. But conversations overheard and half-understood, subtly endorse notions of patriarchy in the child's mind, sowing the seeds of guilt over the conflict between expectations of what constitutes an ideal wife and mother and the natural cravings and desires of the child-woman to seek an identity of her own.

Manthiri's marriage to Mahendra is doomed to failure on the wedding night itself. A bridegroom conditioned by his simple upbringing believes that his bride is not a virgin because the consummation leaves no bloodstains on the nuptial sheet, and condemns himself and Manthiri to a loveless marriage for life. The novel unfolds, transporting Manthiri, Mahendra and their two children on a cross-cultural odyssey to Australia, to patriarchal ambitions colliding with the individualist challenges of the adopted society. It is, however, the translucently emerging subtexts of the novel that would be a psychoanalyst's paradise. In telling the tale of an ordinary life, Chandani creates a tangled web of relationships. At first one is seduced into empathising with Manthiri, much-misunderstood wife and mother, her feelings trampled upon by a boorish husband and unmanageable Sri Lankan born Australian children. But nothing is black and white. What seems on the surface to be a character in love with life, loving and giving, unravels—as the plot

evolves—into an inwardgazing, narcissistic woman. Manthiri's stubborn refusal to take responsibility for her own life, subtly, but surely, distracts the lives of her husband, daughter and son. The passage quoted at the beginning which slides unobtrusively into the narrative holds the key to Manthiri's real persona. Conditioned by her Buddhist upbringing into a mock-surrender mode while rebelling inwardly at all times, Manthiri, at the sane time, adds her own endorsement to the notions of patriarchy in her blatant disregard for her daughter's desires and ambition and in the besotted adoration of her only son.

Chandani manages to carve out each of her characters with luminous brushstrokes of the pen. The ordinariness of daily living now assumes heights of tragedy and now swings back into ordinary tales of failures and successes. Each little chapter stands on its own, luring the reader backward and forward into a mosaic of complex human relationships. Even a harking back to the parental cocoon proves futile in providing Manthiri with the mental equilibrium which she needs to assuage her lack of self worth. Narcissism, the end, betrays the fragility of the hold Manthiri has on the real world and, to one used to taking the line of least resistance, the lure of surrendering one's self to a schizophrenia of selective memories seems irresistible. Chandani uses a couple of extremely effective devices in the structuring of the novel. First, there is the mix of the first person and the third almost continuously in the narrative, which invites the reader into the narrator's soliloquy and takes the story forward. The other engaging technique is almost visual in its impact, in the way the narrator, standing still, trails the absent character in a vivid telling of remembrance and memory: Words seem to be almost dispensable to Chandani's writing—a phrase manages to convey the sensuousness of touch, small and feeling—of a luminous inward glow, of water stirring against thighs. In the end one is left with a wonderful feeling of having gone through a poetic experience in prose, tinged with sadness about life itself: “Like a perfumed *araliya* in a dream, the memory floats. I pull down the shutter.”

Courtesy *The Hindu*, 9 September 2000