

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4038>



Feminism and Intersectionality

Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Monday 18 May 2015

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Feminism requires us to recognise that "women" is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category. Does intersectionality as a universal framework help us to capture this complexity? This paper argues that it does not. It addresses this question through the intricacies of the terrain that feminist politics must negotiate, using the Indian experience to set up conversations with feminist debates and experiences globally. Feminism is heterogeneous and internally differentiated. We need to pay attention to challenges to the stability of given identitiesâ€”including those of "individual" and "woman." These challenges constitute the radically subversive moments that are likely to be most productive for feminism in the 21st century.

This paper has benefited from discussions at a conference on "Intersectionality and Colonialism: Contemporary Debates," University of Paris, 7 March 2014; a presentation at the Centre for Women's Studies, JNU, September 2014; and from the comments of the anonymous reviewer for EPW, Pramada Menon and Sumit Baudh.

In this second decade of the 21st century, we all know that feminism is not in fact about "women" but about recognising how modern discourses of gender produce human beings as exclusively "men" or "women". In other words, feminism requires us to recognise that "women" is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category. But nor are caste, race or class, stable or homogeneous categories.

Does intersectionality as a universal framework help us to capture this complexity? I argue that it does not. In this paper, I will address this question through the intricacies of the terrain that feminist politics must negotiate, using the Indian experience to set up conversations with feminist debates and experiences globally.

Theory must be locatedâ€”we must be alert to the spatial and temporal coordinates that suffuse all theorising. When we in the non-west theorise on the basis of our experiences, we rarely assume that these are generalisable everywhere, unlike theory arising in the West. But we do believe that comparisons and engagements with other feminisms are not only possible, but unavoidable. I assume and address therefore, the lively global feminist voices that surround us.

Two Sets of Questions

The first set of questions we come up against when engaging with the idea of intersectionality circulate around the imperialism of categories, and the manner in which concepts developed in the global North are assumed to have universal validity. Even when an understanding of politics in the global South predates a name for a similar understanding developed in the Western academy, it is the earlier conception that will be named after the later. For instance, in a paper on Ram Manohar Lohia, a Socialist activist and thinker of mid-20th century India, who tried to link caste, class, gender and the politics of language (English versus Hindi) in his life and work, the 21st century writer of the article explicitly uses the framework of intersectionality (Kumar 2010). The point here is not about anachronism, and whether or not concepts can be made to travel across time, because I believe this is possible. Rather, I am suggesting that the tendency when studying the "non-West," is to test the applicability of theory developed through "western" experience, rather than entering into the unfamiliar conceptual field opened up by thinkers and activists in the former.

The assumption is that the concepts emerging from Western (Euro-American) social philosophy necessarily contain within them the possibility of universalisation—the reverse is never assumed. Can, for instance, Julius Nyerere's concept of Ujamaa or the trope of Draupadi as the ambiguous figure of assertive femininity ever be considered relevant to analyse Euro-American experience? But Antigone can be made to speak about women and war everywhere.

The second set of questions has to do with the power of international funding to promote certain concepts. The concept of intersectionality has by now travelled very widely globally, being attached to funding, United Nations (UN) funding in particular. Nira Yuval-Davis tracks the introduction of the concept in the UN to the preparatory session to the World Conference against Racism (WCAR) in September 2001, at which Kimberle Crenshaw, the originator of the concept, was invited to speak (Yuval-Davis 2006: 193).

As a result, in India too, non-governmental organisation (NGO) documents and activists have started to use it quite unproblematically. What are the implications of this kind of “facilitated travel” of concepts, and do funding agendas depoliticise initially radical concepts?

It has been argued even for the country of its birth that the spread and dominance of the intersectionality framework, which has made intersectionality a buzzword, has obscured the fact that different feminist perspectives, from feminists-of-colour to poststructuralist, have long held the notion, as Jennifer C Nash puts it, that identity is formed by “interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality,” that “woman” itself is “contested and fractured terrain,” and that the experience of “woman” is always “constituted by subjects with vastly different interests.” In this sense, Nash argues, “intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment” (2008: 3).

This is even more the case in India, but here it is not simply a question of giving a name to a pre-existing perspective.

‘Woman’ in Indian Feminism

The first set of questions I outlined above, around the “imperialism of categories,” leads us to think about how “Woman” has come to be constituted and reconstituted in feminist politics in India. Generally, the term intersectionality when used in India expresses one of two familiar feminist ideas—“double and triple burdens,” or that “Woman” must be complicated by caste, religion, class. When used in this sense, the term has no particular purchase, and adds nothing new to our understanding. This is because the politics of engaging with multiple identities, their contradictions and interrelations, goes back to the early 20th century and the legacy of anti-imperialist struggles in the global South.

Whether Mahatma Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar in India or African socialists like Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah, most nationalist leaders constructed national identities, not through the idea of individual citizenship but through that of communities—caste, religious, ethnic groups. Their language of politics remained non-individualistic even as the idea of the individual entered these societies via colonial modernity. So there remained always a tension in post-colonial democracies between the individual and the community defined in different ways, as the bearer of rights. This tension is evident in the Indian Constitution, for instance, where the Fundamental Rights protect the rights of both the individual and of the religious community. Sometimes this leads to contradiction between the two—as when equal rights for women as individuals come into conflict with religious personal laws, all of which discriminate against women. Similarly, the demand for reservations in representative institutions on the basis of group identity—“women, castes or religious communities”—fundamentally challenges the individualist conception of political representation at the core of liberal democracy. We will return to these two issues later.

Women's movements in the global South thus never started with the idea of some subtract Woman that they later needed to complicate with more and more layers. This identity of Woman was from the start located within Nation and within communities of different sorts.

The term intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, emerged, in the words of Jennifer C Nash (2008: 2),

"in the late 1980s and early 1990s from critical race studies, a scholarly movement born in the legal academy committed to problematising law's purported colour-blindness, neutrality, and objectivity. From its inception, intersectionality has had a long-standing interest in one particular intersection: the intersection of race and gender. To that end, intersectionality rejects the 'single-axis framework' often embraced by both feminist and anti-racist scholars."

Crenshaw drew attention, instead, to "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences" (1991: 1244).

My argument is that the "single axis framework" was never pre-dominant or unchallenged in our parts of the world. New identities continually arose then, and do now, from different contexts, forcing recognition on our part that all political solidarities are conjunctural and historically contingent.

I refer here to feminist politics on the ground and to feminist scholarship. We will address later in the paper the place and understanding of the category of "women" in funded activism of NGOs and in the governmentalising practices of the state.

The Instability of 'Woman' [1]

The presumed subject of feminist politics has been destabilised in India most notably by the politics of *caste, religious community identity and sexuality*. The politics of caste and religious community identity insistently pose a question mark over the assumed commonality of female experience, thus challenging the identity of "woman," the supposed subject of feminist politics; while the politics of sexuality throws into disarray the certainty of recognisably gender coded bodies, the male-female bipolarity, the naturalising of heterosexual desire and its institutionalisation in marriage.

The growing visibility and militancy of caste politics over the 1990s has increasingly forced the recognition that Woman is not simply an already existing subject which the women's movement can mobilise for its politics. This is most clearly revealed by the debate that has been underway since the late 1990s around reservations for women in Parliament. The opposition to the proposed legislation cannot simply be categorised as patriarchal, it comes from a particular caste location that includes women, which expresses the legitimate apprehension that a blanket reservation of 33% for women (the current proposal being debated), would simply replace "lower" caste men with "upper" caste women. The democratic upsurges of the 1980s transformed Parliament from a largely upper class and upper caste, English-educated body to one that more closely resembles the mass of the population of India in terms of class, caste and educational background. Today an immediate conversion of one-third of the existing seats into ones reserved for women is likely to bring into the fray largely those women who already have the cultural and political capital to contest elections, and in an extremely unequal society like India, these are bound to be elite women.

It may be noted that the opposition to the legislation in India is not that the category of citizen is universal and should remain "unmarked" by any other identity, that its universalism should not be fractured by introducing gender identity. Rather, the opposition to it is in the form of insisting that more identities and differences (caste/community) should be inserted into that of gender—the "quotas within quotas" position. Here a comparison to a similar move in France is instructive.

The parity movement in France, which emerged in the 1990s, was a demand for complete equality, that is, numerically equal representation for women and men in decision-making bodies, especially elected assemblies. However, the debates over the issue played out very differently in France than in India. In France the recognition of gender in citizenship was seen as antithetical to democracy, to universal citizenship in which no difference should be recognised; while those who defended parity too, claimed the universal position—that citizenship would be more truly universal only when gender was recognised. Thus, all arguments in France on the issue of parity—both feminist pro- and anti-parity positions as well as anti-feminist denunciations of parity—were largely in terms of different kinds of reassertion of the Universal. In India as we have seen, on the contrary, the critique was that the universal of "woman" was not fractured *enough*.

It is clear that the distinctive historical trajectories of the two democracies have created different sets of concerns about citizenship and representation—France having undergone a "classic" bourgeois democratic revolution in the 18th century, and India a postcolonial democracy that came into being 200 years later, where the ideal of the abstract and individual citizen as the basis for democracy was never unambiguously enshrined as it was in the European context. Thus, feminist politics must always be sensitive to the significance of different locations, different in terms of both time period and geographical location (Menon 2004).

The challenges to feminist politics from caste politics erupt also in other contexts. A revealing moment of tension was manifested at the National Conference of Autonomous Women's Groups in Kolkata (2006), between the newly politicised bar dancers of Mumbai and Dalit feminist groups, who found it impossible to support bar dancing as a profession. Dalit feminists argued that such forms of "entertainment" are not only patriarchal, but also casteist, since many Dalit women come from castes that are traditionally forced into such professions. Thus, the discomfort of Dalit feminists with sex work and professions seen to be related to prostitution (such as dancing for male audiences in bars), cannot be seen only in terms of conventional morality. There are sharply political and equally feminist positions ranged on both sides, and the opposition between them is not easily amenable to an elite/subaltern division since often both identities, as in this case (Dalit/bar dancer), are equally subaltern, and there are Dalit women on both sides of the debate.

At another level, there is a general suspicion of mainstream Indian feminism among Dalit women, who see it as dominated by privileged dominant caste, upper class, urban feminists and their issues. This too, is a site that is simultaneously acrimonious and productive.

Uniform Civil Code

The politics of religious community identity is best exemplified by the debate over the uniform civil code (UCC).

The debate over the UCC arises from the tension in the Fundamental Rights assured by the Constitution that pits rights of women as individual citizens against rights of communities that have the right to their personal laws. Since these personal laws cover matters of marriage, inheritance and guardianship of children, and since all personal laws discriminate against women, the women's movement had made the demand for a UCC as long ago as 1937, long before independence. However, the UCC has rarely surfaced in public discourse as a feminist issue. It has tended

invariably to be set up in terms of National Integrity versus Cultural Rights of Community.

In other words, the argument for a UCC is made in the name of protecting the integrity of the nation, which is seen to be under threat from plurality of legal systems and from the very existence of difference from the Hindu/Indian norm; while the UCC is resisted on the grounds of cultural rights of communities. Thus a party that stands unambiguously for a UCC is the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for underlying its national integrity argument is the claim that while Hindus have willingly accepted reform, the “other” (minority) communities continue to cling to diverse and retrogressive laws, refusing to merge into the national mainstream.

Thus, there always circulates in the public domain some version of the argument that to be truly secular, India needs a UCC, while from a feminist point of view, the idea of a UCC is less about “secularism”—the relationship between religious communities and the State—and more about gender-injustice—that is, the constitutionally enshrined inequality between men and women.

The women’s movement has moved from a strong demand for a UCC, expressed since the 1930s, to a suspicion of uniformity by the 1990s, taking a hint from the support for a UCC from the Hindu right. This disavowal of uniformity by the women’s movement in the 1990s is significant in that it marks the recognition of the need to rethink the nation and religious communities as homogeneous entities. Each religious community is a heterogeneous one, and “Hindu,” “Muslim” and “Christian” practices differ widely from region to region of India, from sect to sect. Some of these practices are better for women than others, and intra-community drives towards homogenising are as problematic as when such moves are inter-community.

For the women’s movement then, the focus now is on gender-just laws. When reform is initiated “top-down” by the State in the overall atmosphere of anti-minority politics that India sees today, the fear of minority communities is that reform of personal laws is only a pretext for eroding their identity. This is why ongoing reform initiatives from inside the communities themselves have a better chance of succeeding.

Queer Politics

Queer politics has produced a public discourse that insists on the potential fluidity of sexual identifications and the linking of sexuality to other forms of identities, as a politically productive stance. In this context, the term “queer” is increasingly gaining currency among activists familiar with academic and political work in the Anglophone world, although the term may be taking somewhat different forms and directions in India.

The term queer has from the beginning in India gone beyond sexuality. Queer politics sees itself as complicated at its point of origin by class, caste and community identity, and is self-critical to the extent it is unable to engage with this complication. For example, in an intense and introspective essay Sumit Baudh, a Dalit gay man, ruminates on living with these two marginal identities. His upwardly mobile parents hid his Dalit identity from him, and gave him a fictitious surname to pass as a caste Hindu. In an intensely caste-defined society such as India, such “passing” is rare, as one’s caste identity is the first thing made evident by any Hindu name. Baudh writes therefore “Thus, I remained a closet Dalit all through school and college” (2007: 33). In an odd (queer?) reversal then, he begins first by “coming out as Dalit” (a contradiction in terms under normal circumstances in India) and only later as gay.

Queer politics in India engages with the question of biology critically, treating sexuality as fluid, not a biological or genetic given. (Here I refer to explicitly political stances; at an existential level, hijras and many transpeople invariably speak about “feeling like/being women/men in the wrong body.”) Also, it does not attempt to produce a new universal, within which all sexual identities will be submerged. Rather, it sees “queer” as a political and in some ways unstable

term, enabling the continuous challenge to heteronormativity, whether through gay/lesbian/transgender, feminist or other identities.

The politics of caste/community identity and sexuality thus prevents the full constitution of Woman as the stable subject of feminist politics. With this challenge, I suggest that they offer us the potential to explore new ways of being feminist and doing feminist politics. How does intersectionality figure in this analysis?

Intersectionality, Identity, Law

Crenshaw developed the intersectionality framework to address a problem she saw with identity politics, that is, its inability to address internal heterogeneity. Intersectionality claims to do this by recognising gender in race and race in gender, thus breaking up the assumed homogeneity of both "women" and "blacks," while acknowledging the importance of asserting group identity.

However, in my rendering of how caste, religious identity and sexuality travel through and refigure "woman," each of these identities is fundamentally unstable. Each identity emerges or rather, is called into being, in particular contexts in such a way that at that moment it is not simply an intersection of two or more identities but an unstable configuration that is more than the sum of its parts—recall here the figures of the Muslim/Woman in the UCC debate, the Dalit/bar dancer and Dalit/queer that we encountered above.

It is also important to remember that Crenshaw developed the idea of intersectionality in the context of the law, and its inability to recognise multiple identities. If the intention is to make the law sensitive to these different registers, I have argued earlier that in fact the law is most "just" when it does not recognise multiple identities. The functioning of legal discourse tends to subvert the ethical impulse of subordinate groups and to reassert dominant values. Recognising that categories of identity do not "naturally" exist, but are constructed by our political practice, we need to surrender the belief that they can be given the meaning and force we desire through the validation of the law (Menon 2004).

At the same time, the only permissible identities in modern democracies are those put in place by the law. We are inextricably implicated in state and legal procedures—every aspect of my identity is legally established—as woman, as Hindu, as upper caste. But precisely for this reason, because the regulating and defining force of the law is directed towards the creating and naturalising of specific, governable identities, it is a failed project to turn to it to reflect our own complex ethical positions.

For instance in 2002, two high court judgments set aside the election of two hijras from posts reserved for women. They were criticised by queer and democratic rights groups on the grounds that they implied that one cannot choose one's sex and that one should remain within the sex into which one is born.

However, the questions that arise here are more complicated. The judgments were not reflecting on identity itself, but on the even more fraught question of the political representation of identities. What is at stake here is the claim to represent a particular identity. Hijras continue to hold elected posts in general (unreserved) seats, and these judgments did not affect them. The identity of hijras is not in question here. Nor is the fact that hijras today are among the most marginalised of communities in India. The question is—"can hijras represent women in constituencies reserved for women?"

The point at issue, therefore, is not whether one can *biologically* become a woman at any point in one's life, but

whether experiences of "women" of different "classes" and "castes" can somehow be written into parliamentary discourses. Thus, if we are to think of ways in which the experiences of hijras, among other identities, are to be similarly written in, then we must think of more radical alternatives than to divide representation simply between "men" and "others." The experience of oppression that "hijras" have is not reducible to the experience of "women."

A more promising strategy is the demand by hijras to be recognised as a third gender. The recognition of several genders and of multiple and shifting ways of being constituted as political entities may be able to help generate new ways of thinking about representative institutions in a democracy. But the intersectionality framework, especially within the governmentalising practices of the law, cannot engage with the fact that there are multiple foci around which identities form and dissolve.

There have been earlier attempts, unrelated to the intersectionality framework, to confront the tendency of the law to fix meaning. In the Indian context, Marc Galanter's is one of the most notable such endeavours, in which he tries to build into the law a conception of identity, not as a fixed, natural or inherent quality, but as something constituted by interaction and negotiation with other components of society. It is Galanter's view that this understanding of identity would require courts to adopt an "empirical" as opposed to a "formal" approach. The formal approach sees individuals as members of one group only, and therefore, as having only the rights to which that group is entitled. Thus, for example, one who attains caste status loses tribal affiliation as far as the law is concerned. The empirical approach on the other hand, does not attempt to resolve the blurring and overlap between categories and accepts multiple affiliations. It would address itself to the particular legislation involved and tries to determine which affiliation is acceptable in the particular context (Galanter 1984: 357). [2]

What one notes is that all such projects, Galanter's as well as the intersectionality framework included, apply the understanding of identity as relative and shifting only to "people," and not to "courts" or "government." The latter are assumed to be outside grids of affiliations, to have an external and superior understanding of affiliations "people" have, and to be capable of choosing the "correct" perspective, empirical or formal. Such attempts to contest law's rigid codifying procedures are based on the erroneous assumption that the state and law constitute a unified and self-transparent agency that will interpret, correctly or incorrectly, the multiplicity of identities around it.

Even within the global North, there has been considerable queer and feminist rethinking on the value of "intersectionality" in the law. Emily Graham, for instance, points out that "Within the disciplinary system of law, focusing on the 'intersections,' between categories merely leads to the production of 'more' categories thereby supporting the law's propensity to classify" (2008: 186). Graham argues that "not only does intersectionality analysis in law fail to challenge categories...it actually deepens and extends the law's impetus towards the regulatory production of identities" (2008: 193).

Governmentalising Gender [3]

The second set of questions about the governmentalising of intersectionality, and its attachment to funding-driven agendas and policy for the global South, is a feature parallel to the governmentalising of the term "gender" itself. Many feminists and women's movement activists in India have been struck by the general acceptability of the word "gender" in the corridors of state power since the 1990s. The term has been domesticated and has become a synonym for "women"—that is, women as they already are in patriarchal society. While in feminist vocabulary the term "gender" has deeply destabilising potential, relocated within the vocabulary of "governance," it acquires quite another meaning. The concept of "governance" or "good government" has been made popular by the World Bank since 1992. Major donors and international financial institutions are increasingly basing their aid and loans on the condition that governments carry out reforms that ensure "good governance."

A well-known dissection of the concept is that of John Harriss (2002), who demonstrates that "governance" is a powerful tool for the refashioning of the agenda of corporate globalisation, in the face of the recognition that structural adjustment will not succeed without "a human face." Closely tied to governance are the terms "gender sensitivity" and "engendering development," which are about using "women" to regulate development which in essence is corporate globalisation.

The development process undertaken by the Indian state is ecologically unsustainable, further marginalises already deprived communities, and since the 1990s, involves the state acquiring agricultural lands from peasants cheaply and invariably by force, to be handed over to private corporations to develop special economic zones (SEZ).

Mainstreaming gender or adding a "gender component" to development programmes planned within this agenda essentially means using women's specific skills and experience produced by their location within patriarchal society (that is, precisely by the sexual division of labour), to make development programmes successful. Making gender a component of development depoliticises feminist critique, both of patriarchy as well as of development and of corporate globalisation and essentially "empowers" women to act as agents within the overall development agenda of the state.

Women are leading the massive and widespread struggles in India against ecologically unsustainable and unjust capitalist development, against nuclear energy and land acquisition for corporations. It is these enormous and militant waves of struggle that the state seeks to tame through "engendering development." In international human rights discourses, intersectionality helps perform the function of governmentalising and depoliticising gender, by assuming a pre-existing woman bearing multiple identities. According to Yuval-Davis, the very purpose of the introduction of intersectional analysis to human rights discourse is to contribute to "gender mainstreaming," so that "the full diversity of women's experiences" can be considered in order "to enhance women's empowerment" (Center for Women's Global Leadership 2001, cited by Yuval-Davis 2006: 204).

The critique I offer here of governmentality must be differentiated from Nancy Fraser's anxiety that feminism has become the "handmaiden to capitalism" because neo-liberalism uses gender to undermine class (2013). Fraser's argument reveals ignorance of the heterogeneity of feminist politics and scholarship in what we may call "the rest of the world" which this paper gestures towards through its problematic assumption that one kind of UN-driven privileged feminism is the only kind there is. But more importantly, it is naïve in its assumption that "feminist" or "left" categories are in themselves, pure and if they are co-opted by power or governmentalised, their purity itself is in question. After all, capital in the global North used labour rights arguments to limit through the "social clause" the trade advantage for India and China arising from their lax labour standards (Nigam 2001). (This was before the North moved its labour-intensive components to the South to take advantage of that same "cheap labour".) Did support for the social clause make labour rights advocates in the South "handmaidens" of Northern capital?

We need to recognise that destabilising trends have as much potential to be drawn into governmentalising modes, as stabilising ones have to produce sites of instability and resistance.

Thus, the politics of sexuality, arising as it does from the imperatives of HIV/AIDS control and the funding generated by it, can be extremely state-centric and funding imperatives can tame radicalism.

Similarly the politics of caste can get narrowly restricted to the politics of "reservations," leading to internal competitiveness among deprived groups for a larger share in the small part reserved for them. The sharp challenge that Dalit and non-upper caste feminist perspectives pose to the upper-caste orientation of Indian feminism, can get mired in a fruitless debate on "primary contradiction" is caste the primary contradiction or is gender thus solidifying the boundaries of both rather than productively opening them up. The challenge of course, for both feminist and Dalit politics, is to recognise that in different contexts the salience of gender and caste will vary,

requiring both to proceed tentatively, each prepared to be destabilised by the other.

Conversely, government programmes can produce new solidarities among women drawn into them, and radicalise women hitherto unexposed to public activity despite the fact that this is not the goal of such programmes. For instance, one of the most militant and proud faces of the Indian women's movement against sexual violence is that of Bhanwari Devi, who was raped by upper-caste men of her village to punish her for trying to implement the law against child marriage in her village, as an employee of a government programme.

Foucault explains these interrelated moves of power and resistance in a famous interview, using the example of the revolt of the sexual body against the "encroachment" of power on the body. As power produces appropriate bodies—the bodies of children, soldiers, healthy bodies, clearly gendered bodies and so on—in counter-response: "emerge...claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against moral norms..."

But in return power responds precisely to this revolt, for instance, economically and ideologically by exploiting eroticisation, by selling everything from sun-tan products to pornographic films. Power begins now to: "control by stimulation. — Get undressed—but be slim, good-looking, tanned!" For each move by one adversary, there is an answering one by another...One has to recognise the indefiniteness of the struggle..." (Foucault 1980: 56–57).

Fraser's "handmaiden to capitalism" argument fails to recognise the complex nature of the political field that we do in fact inhabit.

Reconsidering Intersectionality

How useful is intersectionality if we read feminist politics in the way this paper does?

Is the intersectionality framework universally fruitful now, regardless of when and where it arose? We have seen how it functions very well within governmentalising frames, but is this concept useful to frame a feminist politics of solidarity across identities?

Let me highlight two issues that for me are problematic. One arises from a certain kind of interpretation of Crenshaw's famous example of the traffic intersection. Based on a presentation by Crenshaw at the WCAR in 2001, a report of a UN meeting interpreted intersectionality in this way (cited by Yuval-Davis 2006: 196):

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group...tries to navigate the main crossing in the city...The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street...She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression.

This reading of intersectionality is indeed the prevalent one. In this, the image is of a (marginalised) individual bearing many marginalised identities, one of which is primary ("the main highway is racism road"). One of the problems with this image that has been addressed in intersectionality studies is that intersectionality theory has

"obscured the question of whether all identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalised subjects have an intersectional identity. While some feminist scholars insist that intersectionality refers to all subject positions"

(which are all fundamentally constituted by the interplay of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc), the overwhelming majority of intersectional scholarship has centred on the particular positions of multiply marginalised subjects. This unresolved theoretical dispute makes it unclear whether intersectionality is a theory of **marginalised subjectivity or a generalised theory of identity**" (Nash 2008: 9–10, emphasis added).

I see a different problem from the perspective of the global South, where, as we saw, individualism never became the uncontested core of identity. The idea of *intersection*" in a general sense, not related to "intersectionality" makes more sense when we think of identities as provisionally forming at the intersection of two or more axes. Not all of the potential identities available in a society to a person or a group may be relevant at all times for them. Rather than a black woman being both black and a woman, she may at times be only black, and at others, only woman. The intersection itself is an empty place.

The subject of feminist politics has to be brought into being by political practice. In other words, there are not pre-existing "women" who may be Hindu or Muslim, upper caste or Dalit, white or black"rather, there are "people" who may respond to different kinds of political challenges as "Dalit" or "Muslim," or as "women." The success of feminism lies precisely in its capacity to motivate "people" to affirm themselves as feminists in different kinds of contexts.

The key notion central to European modernity was the putting in place of the notion of the individual"that "I" am this body and that "my self" stops at the boundaries of my skin. Although this seems an entirely natural identification to the modern mind, it is in fact only about 400 years old and has specific cultural moorings in the experience of the West. In non-Western societies this notion of the individual, separate from all other individuals, as the unit of society, is still not an uncontested one. At every level in non-Western societies then, there remains a sense of self that is produced at the intersection of individuated bodies and collectivities of different sorts. Individuation then, that is, the process of recognising oneself as primarily an individual, is as much a process of identity formation as the process of recognising oneself as Black or Dalit or Woman, and is always a process in the present continuous in our parts of the world. Identity is not something taken on by pre-existing individuals. All politics then is "identity politics"whether based on class or on liberal individualism.

It is against this backdrop that we must ask the question"was even sex/gender a universally relevant criterion of social differentiation at all? That is, did all societies at all times and in all places make male/female distinctions that sustained themselves over stable bodies?

This question is raised frontally by Nigerian scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi, who challenges the universality of gender as a social category. She argues that Western anthropologists, even feminists, failed to understand African society in its own terms, because they assumed that gender identities and hierarchies were universal: "If the investigator assumes gender, then gender categories will be found whether they exist or not" (Oyewumi 1997: 16).

Oyewumi argues that the emergence of patriarchy as a form of social organisation in the West is rooted in particular assumptions that emerged with modernity in the West"the gradual privileging of gender difference as the primary difference in society, and locating this difference in certain visual cues. Oyewumi thus makes the radical suggestion that "gender" as a category did not operate in any significant way in precolonial Yoruba and many other African cultures (1997). Even with the sweeping transformations brought about by colonial modernity in these societies, counter-memory continues to circulate around bodies and identities even to this day.

What I find revealing in debates on intersectionality, even among its critics, is the total lack of engagement with literature outside the Euro-North American (at most Australian) academy. Even a thoroughgoing analysis such as that of Yuval-Davis (2006) cites just one scholar from the global South"misspelling both his names (Ashis Nandy becomes Ashish Nandi)"when entire libraries can be filled with feminist theorising available in English, precisely of

multiple identities, from South Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The second problem arises from the key idea in Patricia Hill Collins that the intersectional paradigm views race, class, gender and so on as “*mutually constructing* systems of power. Because these systems permeate all social relations, untangling their effects in any given situation or for any given population remains difficult” (2005: 11).

Hill Collins’ idea of “mutually reinforcing vectors” as remaining within the framework of double and triple burdens borne by already existing “women” has been criticised for its essentialised notion of identity and for its additive character. For instance, Yuval-Davis, tracking the gradual entry of “intersectionality” into UN documents, notes the continuous collapse of intersectionality to “identity” even when more complex arguments are being outlined (2006: 196–97). She points out that too often intersectionality analysis “does not attend to the differential positionings of power in which different identity groups can be located in specific historical contexts, let alone the dynamics of power relations within these groups. Nor does it give recognition to the potentially contested nature of the boundaries of these identity groupings and the possibly contested political claims for representation of people located in the same social positioning” (2006: 204).

Global Perspective

However, it is imperative for us as feminists to make another kind of critique too. I would argue that we need to see these structures not as necessarily mutually reinforcing but as often working against one another and weakening one another. Capitalist globalisation undermines traditional patriarchies and caste hierarchies, and globalisation of capital also leads to globalisation of dissent and struggle. Dalits abandon traditional occupations and enjoy the new anonymous worlds that replace the “old worlds” the loss of which ecological frameworks mourn. Women get work—“exploitative work” in sweat shops, and they become the main earners of their families, challenging internal family hierarchies of age and gender, while many of them also learn to organise against capital itself.

Sometimes some of this comes together in resistance, sometimes different subaltern positions are in conflict with one another, as we have seen throughout this paper.

Patriarchy, capitalism, caste—none of these are closed orders. Their borders are porous, the social order fragile, and every structure is constantly destabilised by another outside of it. Like any other structure of power then, patriarchy too has an “outside,” as has capitalism, and caste and race, which is what makes possible the different kinds of recalcitrance we have seen, that constantly undermine them.

In Conclusion

I am far from attempting to produce another universal framework to replace intersectionality, and nor am I arguing that the term has no relevance anywhere. I am suggesting rather, that:

- (a) Feminist solidarities as well as disjunctures in solidarity must be seen as conjunctural, fluid and radically negotiable. No universal framework can capture this conjunctural nature of political engagement; and
- (b) I suggest that as we saw with the governmentalisation of gender, the easy acceptability of intersectionality for international funding agencies should give us pause. The term intersectionality seems to work not for *feminism*, but

for states and international funding agencies.

As Mrinalini Sinha has pointed out, to “bring a global perspective to gender” means not seeing the world through a universalising perspective, but “taking theoretical cognisance of the local and empirical,” thus producing a “dense contextual analysis.” This move would protect us against two tendencies—“false analogies between different historical formations,” and naturalising the present, thus limiting the possibilities of the future. It would also open us to a feminist politics “whose concepts and strategies are flexible enough to respond to changing conditions” (Sinha 2012: 370–71).

Feminism is heterogeneous and internally differentiated across contexts. This recognition makes it impossible to articulate a simple “feminist” position on any issue, and alerts us to what Walter Mignolo has termed “diversity”—the recognition of diversity as a universal condition (2000). Analyses that begin with the assumption of a unified and homogeneous category of “woman” may well be productively opened up to other identities by the intersectionality framework; but analyses that begin with the understanding that identity is provisional and conjunctural, would find, I have argued, that the intersectionality framework freezes notions of pre-existing individual, woman and other identities. Attention to diversity teaches us that universal frameworks generally flow from the North to the South, that the direction of this flow this is not simply coincidental, and that close attention to specificities of time and place would reveal the inadequacy of universal paradigms.

From [Economic and Political Weekly Vol - L No. 17, April 25, 2015.](#)

References

Baudh, Sumit (2007): “Reflections of a Queer Dalit,” *In Plainspeak*, Issue 3.

Collins, Patricia Hill (2005): *Black Sexual Politics*, New York: Routledge.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1989): “Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139.

“ (1991): “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, Vol 43, No 6: 1241–99.

“ (2001) “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color,” paper presented at the World Conference against Racism. Cited by Nira Yuval-Davis (2006).

Foucault, Michel (1980): “Body/Power” in *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Fraser, Nancy (2013): “How Feminism became Capitalism’s Handmaiden—and How to Reclaim It,” *The Guardian*, Monday, 14 October.

Galanter, Marc (1984): *Competing Equalities, Law and the Backward Classes in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Grabham, Emily (2008): “Intersectionality, Traumatic Impressions” in Emily Grabham, Davina Cooper, Jane

Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India

Krishnadas and Didi Herman (eds), *Intersectionality and Beyond. Law, Power and the Politics of Location*, London: Routledge-Cavendish.

Harriss, John (2002): *Depoliticising Development: The World Bank and Social Capital*, New Delhi: LeftWord Books.

Kumar, Anand (2010): "Understanding Lohia's Political Sociology: Intersectionality of Caste, Class, Gender and Language," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2 October, Vol XLV, No 40.

Menon, Nivedita (2004): *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black and University of Illinois Press.

â€” (2009): "Sexuality, Caste, Governmentality: Contests over 'Gender' in India," *Feminist Review*, Issue 91.

â€” (2012): *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Delhi: Penguin India and Zubaan Books.

Mignolo, Walter (2000): *Local Histories/Global Designs: Essays on the Coloniality of Power, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Nash, Jennifer C (2008): "Re-thinking Intersectionality," *Feminist Review*, 89, (1–15).

Nigam, Aditya (2001): "Radical Politics in the time of Globalisation" in Niraja Gopal Jayal and Sudha Pai (eds), *Democratic Governance in India: Challenges of Poverty, Development and Identity*, New Delhi, Sage Publications.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke (1997): *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, University of Minnesota Press.

Sinha, Mrinalini (2012): "A Global Perspective on Gender, What's South Asia Got To Do With It?" in Ania Loomba and Ritty Lukose (eds), *South Asian Feminisms*, Duke University Press.

Yuval-Davis, Nira (2006): "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13, 3.

[1] This section draws on my paper "Sexuality, Caste, Governmentality: Contests over 'Gender' in India," *Feminist Review*, Issue 91, 2009 and my book *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Delhi: Penguin India and Zubaan Books, 2012.

[2] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Menon (2004).

[3] This section draws on my paper "Sexuality, Caste, Governmentality: Contests over 'Gender' in India," *Feminist Review*, Issue 91, 2009.