

The Pink Chaddi Protest and Feminism: A Dressing Down of the Politics of Development in India

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Abstract: *In recent times, India has witnessed a number of protest movements that have interrogated, challenged and changed the practices and processes of its democratic functioning. The Pink Chaddi campaign has been one such popular agitation that has foregrounded the issue of access, equity and rights of women and its complex engagement with the discourse of development and the project of modernity. This essay examines just how 'radical' is this movement in creating and appropriating 'space' in the political, social and cultural matrix of postcolonial India and what is its relation with Indian feminism. The analysis is based on the premise that hardline majoritarian politics exercises its powerful control over women by fortifying spatial boundaries – the public domain for men and the private for women. The Pink Chaddi campaign may be read as a clearing of spaces to articulate women's rights, to disarm all forms of gendered power relations, and to raise consciousness about the need for gender parity for a truly equitable and developed society.*

Keywords: *Development, feminism, gender, Pink Chaddi, space*

This paper examines the politics of development and the project of modernity in post-independent India in relation to a recent protest movement of women, the Pink Chaddi campaign. It contextualizes the happening of these events by linking their subversive tendencies to the trespassing and appropriation of public spaces that have historically been the domain of change and activity brought on by Indian male. The paper examines the specific nature of this discursive challenge by Indian women in two ways. First, it tries to define the usurpation of male-centric space in terms of both its continuity as well as its opposition to a postcolonial agenda of the state that is rooted in patriarchy and masculinity. Second, it looks at how these forms of protest by women complicate the essential and normative understanding of contemporary Indian feminism. On the basis of these two strands the essay speculates on whether the emergence of such new 'radical' movements launched by women signals the birth of transformative politics in postcolonial India, one that opens up the possibility for the 21st century Indian women to go beyond the cultural boundaries imposed on her sexual expression and her rightful need for gender parity.

Theorists of different ideological hues like Partha Chatterjee, Dipankar Gupta, Ashish Nandy and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have firmly established the fact that the nation-state produces a development discourse that is a highly gendered construct in terms of the idea and practice of citizenry. Citizenship, a supposedly public identity, is produced and mediated within the private space of a heterosexual patriarchal family. Feminist thought thus recognizes the patriarchal family as the basis for the secondary status of women in society, and hence the feminist slogan—"The personal is the political". As Nivedita Menon says in 'Seeing like a Feminist', "what is considered to be 'personal' (the bedroom, the kitchen', has to be recognized as completely submerged in power relations, with significant implications for what is called 'the public' (property, paid work, citizenship)—it is, therefore, 'political'. Moreover, the subscription to citizenship in a nation-state such as India is fraught with several challenges: Who defines and sanctions the role of citizens in a free state? Are the rights of citizenship equally available to all sections of people irrespective of class, caste and gender? How do marginalized/ subaltern constituencies bereft of agency, access and equity fight for their rights? What of women, their freedom and their lives?

Clearly, one of the agendas of the feminist movement in India has been to contest and break down the rigid boundaries that separate the masculinized domain of the public from the feminized space of the private. To lay claim and register their presence in the prohibitory spaces of public domain is more than a gesture of tokenism; it is a radical liberatory move for women, another step forward towards the goal of true empowerment. In today's times, the breakaway of women from the regulated confines of domesticity and home

to assume an active participatory role in the spaces of the free market as well as in statist institutions and sectors has been a sign of emancipation.

However, this signal advancement of feminism in a postcolonial postmodern India is layered with many texts and subtexts. The increased visibility and mobility of women may be associated with a number of moves and counter-moves within the operation of gendered modes of power. In the process of shaping new identities and forming new constituencies of community, work and family, Indian women in the 21st century challenge essentialized notions of nation, state and ideology. They have closed ranks and organized themselves by evolving new methods of resistance and contestation. One such transformative move has been the deliberate infiltration of public spaces by storming into the streets or taking recourse to social media in order to fight against gender discrimination and exploitation.

These countervailing moves aim at destabilizing three apparatuses whose regime of power and violence has held women in subjugation for decades. –

- a right-wing masculinist nationalist ideology
- an age-old feudal patriarchal tradition
- a heteronormative colonial history

Postcolonial politics in India has devolved in shape and pattern by operating exclusively along the axis of the public/private distinction and its asymmetrical relationship with men and women. Whereas men have had an unrestricted freedom to intervene, dominate and commute between these binaries, women have been barred from doing the same.

It must be remembered that in the late nineteenth century, Hindu nationalists and revivalists in the subcontinent reconstituted the ‘home’- along with sex and sexuality – as a ‘pure’ space of Indian culture, uncontaminated by the colonial encounter. The modern nation-state was fashioned in the home for want of any public space or institutions to construct a modern national identity and culture.

Partha Chatterjee has argued that as there were no public spaces or institutions available to nationalists for constructing a national culture, the modern nation was fashioned in the autonomous private domain of culture. The ‘official’ culture of Indian middle-class nationalism was elaborated in the private domain- ‘the home’ that had important implications on the role of sexuality in nationalist discourse. The home as the repository of national identity had to be protected from colonial intrusions concerning women by using their virtues of ‘chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love’ as a cultural defence to such intrusions. Chatterjee links this transformation of women through nationalist ideology with the disappearance of social reform in the late nineteenth century.

But recent scholarship indicates that women were also active in the public sphere, and that they were not docile recipients of the interactions between the social reformers, cultural nationalists, and the colonial power. The public and private spheres were not two neat categories, where the public was exclusively defined and determined by the imperial power and the private by the anti-colonial nationalists. Home was, in fact, a highly contested cultural space where there were tensions over women’s role as preservers of cultural identity. So women’s identity as political activists, even in the late nineteenth century, was constantly in tension with their relationship to their community. This tension over the ‘disavowal and constitution’ of communities in the claims made for and by women remained a central feature of women’s political participation and construction of their identities in the emerging nation-state. This tension continues to inform women’s political belongingness/nonbelongingness in the contemporary period.

One recent women’s protest in India is a pointer to the new ‘radical expressions by which feminism is contesting the increasing right-wing extremism of the nation’s body polity. The flash point of the protest was an assault on young women in a pub in Mangalore in 2009 carried out by lumpen elements of Sri Ram Sena, a fringe organization having affiliations to the Rashtriya Sewa Sangh (RSS) and the BJP. The incident sparked off a wave of nation-wide protests and solidarity campaigns, both off and online. However, one protest that had everyone, including the media, talking about the most was a bold and cheeky campaign, called the Pink Chaddi. Delhi journalist, Nisha Susan, launched a Facebook group naughtily named ‘Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women’ which urged women to send pink chaddis to the leader of the Hindu outfit as a gift on Valentine’s Day. The Sri Ram Sena office received over 2000 chaddis and the organization became the butt of ridicule across the world.

What made the incident interesting were the wide-ranging responses it evoked, revealing different positions across the political spectrum. The Hindu organization, in the eye of the storm, initially tried to justify their attack on the pretext of protecting Indian culture before ducking for cover. Predictably, the rationale behind their public utterances smacked of the same homophobic colonial fear that was instilled in the making of the nationalist discourse- the fear of contamination by the ‘other’. Showing no remorse or compunction, they wanted to ‘teach a lesson’ to women who refuse to live by patriarchal rules. That to them meant submitting to the proverbial ‘Laxman rekha’, the mythified boundary that an age-old Hindu tradition has imposed on women

and one that has been vaunted by jingoistic fervour in the name of nationalist pride and honour. Clearly, the identification of women as ‘victims’ and their bodies as ‘body of evidence’ is a patriarchal act of fixing them as subjects and thereby denying any mode of agency to them. The demarcation of space as well as the gendered division of labour is carefully incorporated in the surveillance and control of women and their sexuality by panoptical state with its male gaze.

The state in its desire to maintain order and stability must ‘discipline and punish’ (Foucault) any act by any group that is construed as threatening the status quo. However, the State must also safeguard and promote the interests of all, especially underprivileged groups. It is in the in-between gap between the state’s statutory aims and its actual functioning falls the shadow of a political ideology that perpetuates discrimination and exploitation. But the State is not an abstraction, a legislated automaton—it functions through agencies and apparatuses (ideological as well as regulatory in the Althusserian sense) that bring into operation a set of beliefs and ideas that carry the dominant strain of those in power and authority.

It is well to consider that women’s identity in independent India was reshaped and reconstituted by the nationalist agenda in a manner that carried on the old markers of the colonial encounter. In the unfolding of the fantasy of the new emergent nation, the image of a pure chaste Indian woman was reified both by Victorian prudery that inflected the colonial encounter as well as the strident desire of the nationalist vision to install development’s project in masculinized public spaces that overrode the substantive need of women to involve and participate in the processes of change. As a result the entire discourse of development that defined Indian postcoloniality was superscribed on the puritanical image of the Indian woman’s sexuality whose containment was necessary by confining women in the inner/private/home space as distinct from the outer/public/work space.

The paper advances the idea that the politics of post-independent India has been played out in the intersection of two conceptual categories that have had tremendous investment in shaping the nation’s lived reality—‘development’ and ‘modernity’. Conventionally, the two terms have been used interchangeably, modernity as development and development as modernity. The conflation of these categories as synonymous and synchronous has been used as an ideological plank to propel the nation’s growth as well as to serve as indices of its measurement. Development has been the propellant for driving the nation on the road to progress from the time of independence. However, as pointed out by political theorists, social commentators and feminists, whereas the project of state-sponsored development in the form of 5-year plans, social reforms, legislation for protection of minorities and women, education policy, etc. was inspired by the zeal to reform society and empower women, a flawed mechanism of implementation derailed the avowed aims and merely reinforced the ill effects of a discriminatory gendered polity.

So, while the equal rights discourse ran its course contiguous to that of modernity, the discourse of ‘uplift’ got hooked to that of development. Eventually, the discourse of modernity based on the irrefutable logic of equal rights was derailed by the discourse of uplift or of development. The failure happened not because the idea of development as an article of faith for the founding fathers of the nation was at fault, but because the flawed logic of statist procedures and policies led to further domination and manipulation of women, their bodies and their sexuality. In the name of upliftment of women, the discourse of development harked back upon the abstract image of ‘Indian womanhood’ –an idea that has become obligatory for the nationalist narrative to rally around from colonial times to the present. The ideological construction of women as abstractions of purity and chastity by the nationalist discourse, their mythification as ‘Bharat Mata’ or as ‘Sati/Savitri’, and their simultaneous subjugation as the ‘other’ of men led to a situation in which the two discursive strands that had initially held so much promise for men, women and the nation got untethered. This resulted in the fragmentation of identity of both women and the postcolonial nation.

With regard to the Pink Chaddi protest, what is evident is that the violent act perpetrated by the cultural vandals in the guise of ‘taking care’ of women is symptomatic of the deep-seated fear and anxiety inflected in the masculine nationalist project of development. Of course, the moral policing of women by the Hindu right-wing outfit played out the familiar stereotypes of pub-going women as ‘loose and forward’. The paper’s analysis stresses the moot point that hardline majoritarian politics exercises its powerful control over women by fortifying spatial boundaries – the public domain for men and the private for women. When the forces of Hindu revivalism feel threatened by any act of resistance, the ploy is to invoke traditional tropes of patriarchy and nationalism that keep unequal divisions of caste, class and gender firmly fixed. Part of that strategy is to prescribe what constitutes ‘good’/‘safe’/‘moral’ behaviour for women.

Moreover, as politics in India is played out in the open, in full public view, it is men who are usually the key players in steering its course. Notwithstanding the history of women as political personages, including Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Mayawati, Jayalalitha and Mamta Banerjee, the sexist thought prevails that only men have the political acumen to succeed in politics. However, the Pink Chaddi protest took the battle into the open against political vandals posing as ‘maryada purushottams’. And, the ‘womanists’ by not invoking ‘stree shakti’ kept their language free of gender bias. This usurpation of public space by the Pink Chaddi activists was perceived as a threat to modernity’s masculinized narrative. It challenged the nationalist construct of “women”,

what Partha Chatterjee describes as “a sign for “nation”, namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on” (Chatterjee: 1999).

Drawing on the dichotomy of gendering of space in his essay on ‘The Nation and its Women’ (1996), Chatterjee points out that the ascription of spirituality to women by nationalist thought did not “impede the chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines of the home; on the contrary, it facilitated it, making it possible for her to go into the world under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. In fact, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (131). Just as well in a postcolonial nation, the project of modernity piggybacked on a new patriarchy that conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility. For every act of male transgression - drinking, smoking and debauching – every capitulation now had to be compensated for by an assertion of spiritual putiry on the part of women. The association of female emancipation to the historicity of national sovereignty established a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination.

In the light of this historical tradition, the subversion and assertion of a new identity of women’s empowerment was what made the Pink Chaddi campaign get under the skin of the custodians of culture, the upholders of tradition. By crossing the ‘Lakshman rekha’, the women refused to be fixed by a nationalist ideology based on the gendering of roles according to masculine/feminine qualities. The crossing of borders, both physical and ideological, was also a symbolic act of revolt by deliberately flaunting the image of a Westernized woman as a brazen, drinking and smoking ‘pub-licist’. It deliberately displaced the essentialized construct of woman as wife/sister/daughter as ‘normal’ at home as well as in public so long as it adhered to the normative standards of nationalism. Instead, by making the protest go viral online, the campaigners ‘virtually’ invaded and took over the democratic borderless domain of the World Wide Web. This act of women empowerment and agency by using the tools of the internet like blogs, e-papers, facebook, and twitter was another watershed moment in the history of Indian feminist movement. The event announced the arrival in India ‘cyber feminism’, a new media feminism that has already impacted the way women’s movements have developed in the west.

While the participants of the Pink Chaddi campaign did not perceive their act in a feminist light, clearly their aim in directing their protest in such a novel manner was to establish their unequivocal rights to be in public spaces doing things at all times of the day and night. They refused to submit themselves to the dictates of right-wing extremism. And so by sending to a public space that part of clothing which for a woman is the most ‘private, they were exhibiting a manifesto of women’s sexuality that dealt a hard slap on the face of Hindu right-wingers. This in-your-face attitude of the campaigners against cultural fascism was also seen in the posts and tweets that went viral in social networking sites. In the end what was ‘radical’ about the movement was a complete appropriation of both virtual and public space. Nivedita Menon writing on the same point has an altogether different take on this aspect of the protest. In her words,

“It is striking that the campaign used the word ‘chaddi’ rather than ‘panty’, simultaneously desexualizing the piece of clothing, ungendering it (chaddi refers to underwear in general, not just to women’s panties), and playing on the pejorative slang for Hindu right-wingers, after the uniform of their parent organization, the RSS, whose members wear khaki shorts.” (SLF: 137)

Despite the difference in these two interpretations, what is clear is the symbolic significance of the use of ‘chaddi’ as an object of protest. In fact, Menon’s political and the paper’s feminist reading of the act, both disturb and debunk the myths of modernity: liberal globalization has supplanted all other ‘isms’; market capitalism has effaced inaccessibility of socially disadvantaged groups including women; and, development narrative is no longer a masquerade of operative public values that have superseded the prejudicial elements of the dominant culture.

Of course, there remains another angle to the campaign, one that raises the question as to whether the Pink Chaddi campaign may be truly considered a ‘radical’ move of Indian feminism or a feminist act at all. Some feminists, in fact, refused to see the protest as emblematic of their political agenda, and voiced their anger and dissent with as much visibility on the social media as what the supporters did to muster strength in numbers for the movement. Shobha De in her column in the Times of India, for example, dismissed the event as an import from the west, having no connect with the miserable lives that most women lead in a Third World country like India. While an argument such as hers does hold water given the reality of the Indian context, yet the paper argues that movements like the Pink Chaddi protest or SlutWalk call for a relook at feminism itself as well as its inseparable relation to the gendered project of modernity in pre-independent India. At least debate over the relevance or otherwise of campaigns for women’s expression makes open and public a critique of the dominant attitudes towards sexuality, and the manner in which gender operates within asymmetries of power.

To conclude, in the narrative of the development of post-independent Indian the female body has become a political body and a powerful site of resistance. It is subjected to harassment, derision, and violence by the hegemonic political and cultural ideology that is embedded in the statist project of modernity. By prohibiting women from the use of public spaces, the discourse of development continues to perpetuate the hold of

normative injunctions that were codified by a colonial history and a patriarchal and patrilineal tradition. One may surmise that a crucial agenda for Indian feminism in the context of the nation's development politics is the clearing of spaces to articulate their rights, to disarm all forms of gendered power relations that are installed therein, and to raise consciousness in a manner that no longer considers women as victims needing protection, but as active agents having the agency to engage with power and to carve out their own spaces. The Pink Chaddi campaign is a striking instance of how a women's protest for simply demanding the right to lead lives of freedom and choice throws up complex issues of sex, gender and modernity. It is an example of how a mistaken modernity too can be given a pink slip.

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