

May-2006

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## Recommended Citation

Bedi, Tarini (2006). Feminist Theory and the Right-Wing: Shiv Sena Women Mobilize Mumbai. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(4), 51-68.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss4/4>

## Feminist Theory and the Right-Wing: Shiv Sena Women Mobilize Mumbai<sup>1</sup>

By Tarini Bedi<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Feminist scholars engaged in the study of women and religion often grapple with the problem of how to theorize the phenomenon of women's attraction to, and active involvement in politico-religious movements characterized by strongly "patriarchal" authority structures, and by ideologies that either seem to denigrate women or assign them to subordinate social and symbolic roles. This paper looks at some of the approaches that have been taken by feminist scholars to this issue. It reviews some key adaptations of feminist theory to the rising phenomena of women's public participation in religious, right-wing agendas. It specifically explores the relevance of feminist theory for understanding women's involvement in movements driven by Hindu religious revivalism in India. Using ethnographic data collected on the activities of the women's wing of the right-wing, Shiv Sena party (Shivaji's Army) in India, it explores the alternative ways by which feminist theorization might engage with the construction of the female subject that comes into being through religiously motivated political and social agendas in the postcolonial world.

*Keywords:* feminist theory, right-wing women, religious nationalism

### Introduction

This paper is a review of some of the feminist approaches to the mobilization of women by right-wing politico-religious movements. The goal is to contribute to a discussion of the possibilities for alternative forms of feminist agency within rapidly changing urban contexts where women's lives are intertwined with media and consumer practices, greater physical mobility, and increases in the female workforce. It is an exploratory exercise that uses ethnographic data collected from the women's wing of the Hindu nationalist *Shiv Sena* party in Western India as the lens through which to debate the multiple ways by which everyday women, negotiate their everyday lives simply to get through the day. It is recognition of these multiple forms of agency articulated by *Shiv Sena* women that makes it almost impossible for me to provide a 'final' paradigmatic approach to aid the understanding of right-wing women from a feminist approach. Instead, I review multiple approaches that shed light on women's everyday negotiation of political and religious contexts as they live out their public and private lives.

An examination of some of the current debates on women of the right-wing (a surprisingly un-theorized subject until very recently) illustrates the complexities of the topic, particularly the realities of the immensely vexed relationship between feminism and right-wing movements. Moreover, in the case of Hindu nationalist or *Hindutva*<sup>3</sup> movements, this paper

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<sup>1</sup> Mumbai is the new name of the city formerly known as Bombay, located on the Western coast of India. The city was officially renamed in 1995 under the aegis of the Shiv Sena government in power at the time.

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<sup>3</sup> Generally understood as the increasing political influence of Hindu religious discourse and practice in the modern Indian state (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; VanderVeer, 1994).

argues that feminist analyses, despite their highly diverse forms, are useful as much as they are somewhat problematic. For the most part, this problematic arises out of a singular feminist commitment to the ideas of “emancipation” and “patriarchy” (Mahmood, 2001; 2005). By taking on some of the feminist critiques of right-wing mobilization and analyzing them in the context of *Shiv Sena* women in Mumbai (Bombay), India, I do not suggest that this religious, mobilization is either a “liberal” or a progressive force in the many ways that feminism has been. However, what I do explore is an approach that addresses the desperate need to examine the individual and collective motivations of women of the right-wing in ways that illuminate their own perceptions of themselves as powerful actors within their political party and in their communities-- even if this is often a morally troubling position to take.

### **Feminism and the Right-Wing: The Need for Theoretical Approaches**

The rise of cultural revivalist movements across the world has provided feminist scholars with multiple sites at which to critique the “patriarchy” and “sexist” ideological structures of these movements. However, the rise of these movements has been very important for both feminist theory and feminist activism. For one, the fact that women in right-wing movements have generally been ignored as historically significant in both scholarly and popular narratives has made their examination almost an imperative for feminist scholars. This is often so even as feminist scholars find themselves at odds with the ideological roots of these movements (Koonz, 1987). However, the increasing participation of women in these movements has meant that the “problem” of right-wing women cannot be ignored (Pateman & Gross, 1986). This “problem” has forced feminism to engage in a somewhat conflicted relationship with what agency really means and the diverse sites at which agency might be constituted (Gardiner, 1995). These cultural revivalist movements are variably described as “fundamentalist” (Moghadam, 1994a), “communalist” (Jeffrey & Basu, 1998), or “oppositional” (Power, 2002). It could be argued that the Hindu nationalist mobilization of women in India has, at various points, spanned all three of the latter types. The *Shiv Sena*<sup>4</sup> has certainly been all these at various points in its career. In its early years it constituted itself as a regional movement that was “oppositional” to, and critical of more embedded forms of political and economic power in the western state of Maharashtra. As it gained electoral power, it took on both communalist and fundamentalist forms allied with *Hindutva* and the critique of the moral lives of an Indian public seduced by a rising economic consumerism. However, despite the evolution of the party’s agendas and its tactics, its own self-construction remains rooted in an oppositional, maverick, and locally constituted ‘modern’ identity; and its publicly aggressive, often ‘criminalized’ tactics seem to draw from this construction (Hansen, 2001).

The Shiv Sena (named after the Maratha warrior Shivaji) was founded in Bombay (now *Mumbai*) by former journalist and cartoonist Bal Thackeray (now referred to by Sena members as *Supremo*) in 1966 as a populist, “sons of the soil” movement (Gupta, 1982; Hansen, 1999, 2001; Katzenstein, 1973, 1979). The women’s wing, the *Mahila Aghadi* (literally translated as “women in front,” though interpreted for me by my informants as “women first”), is comprised largely of middle and lower-middle class women who often live in and, on the edges of the Mumbai slums. There is only very vague official documentation on the establishment of the *Mahila Aghadi* (hereby referred to as the *Aghadi*).<sup>5</sup> Hence, much of the reconstruction of its birth

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably more flexible in terms of its rites of membership than other Hindu nationalist parties, and therefore particularly interesting to a theory of agency.

<sup>5</sup> This paper uses the terms “Aghadi” and “Shiv Sena women” interchangeably; both terms refer to the same group of women.

comes through the narratives of women who see themselves as its “original” founders. The absence of a master-narrative for the establishment of the women’s wing is telling especially given the almost mythic nature of the establishment narrative of the larger *Shiv Sena* party. Instead, the *Aghadi*’s narratives of its establishment take on the form desired by the teller. If there is a common thread, it is that all the narratives of women who see themselves as ‘original’ members suggest their own actions as absolutely key to the founding of the *Aghadi*. From these, I gather that the *Aghadi* was born out of the efforts of young Maharashtrian women in Bombay touched by the joblessness of their fathers and brothers, and therefore attracted to the Shiv Sena’s potent “sons of the soil” message. This initial message was one that critiqued the economic marginalization of Maharashtrians<sup>6</sup> in the rapidly de-industrializing Bombay of the 1960s and 70s. The multiple founding narratives despite their diversity, all focus on events where women’s bodies were inserted into public space as the defining moment of the *Aghadi*’s inception (Interviews with Founding Members). The *Aghadi* gained more public prominence and was integrated into the structure of the larger party through the influence of Thackeray’s late wife Meena *tai* (*tai* is the Marathi term for older sister) in the 1980s. Meena *tai* continues to be a key iconic figure. At all Shiv Sena sponsored events a large portrait of her almost always stands alongside a bust of Shivaji and all ceremonies begin with a garlanding ritual of both. Since its founding, women of the *Aghadi* have constituted themselves both collectively and individually against a changing array of ‘others.’ The articulation of religious, linguistic, and ‘moral’ difference between the Maharashtrian, female Shiv Sainik and the ‘other,’ the enemy—migrants from south India, Muslims, migrants from north India, and more recently the westernized woman, has played a key part in their conceptions of political and moral power. It has also critically affected the ways in which power gets practiced in the urban contexts in which *Shiv Sena* women live.

Women’s movements of the religious right are generally organized to do one of two things. Either they seek to acquire political power or they seek to maintain and legitimize power (Moghadam, 1994b). No doubt, there are plenty of ways in which the right-wing mobilizes women toward ends that are quite independent of demands for outright state power; however, generally, these demands are most often intricately tied to influencing state power, social relations, or public opinion in both direct and indirect ways. American right-wing women and their anti-abortion and “white supremacist” mobilization are examples of this (Blee, 1991; Klatch, 1994). The case of women of the Hindu right in India illustrates the dilemmas of women’s movements in many parts of the postcolonial world. On the one hand, women’s participation involves the ‘political’ expression of nationalism, which can be reconciled with the secular, liberal politics of feminism; on the other, this nationalist identity gets expressed in terms of an exclusivist, religious language (Basu, 1995b; 1998b).

Feminism has been somewhat successful at integrating the issues of class, race, sexuality, and nationalism into the feminist critique (Andersen & Collins, 1995; hooks, 1990; Kuhn & Wolpe, 1978; Parker, Russo, Sommer, & Yaeger, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1997). The question of religion and religious ideologies continues to confound. (Basu, 1998b; Mahmood, 2001; 2005). Generally, feminist scholarship agrees, that what have been termed right-wing movements construct an ideological apparatus that champions cultural revivalism, religious “fundamentalism” and sexual and gendered affirmation. (Moghadam, 1994b). Feminist scholarship also agrees that these cultural and religious revivalist movements with their discursive reification of motherhood and the affirmation of women’s repression in an

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<sup>6</sup> Residents of the state of Maharashtra and speakers of the state language Marathi.

uncontestable divine domain have posed a general threat to the secular liberal politics that feminism has historically aligned itself with (Butler & Scott, 1992; Chodorow, 1978; Koonz, 1987; Papenek, 1994).

One of the key issues that this feminist scholarship has had to deal with is to decipher how far women's participation in religious right-wing politics represents conscious, independent action or choice. Some scholars of the Hindu right suggest that it is important to see Hindu communalism as a 'conscious' political project rather than simply in terms of the Hindu religion (Agarwal, 1995). Therefore, women's mobilization within *Hindutva* can be looked at as a "political" project that simply utilizes cultural, religious discourses in its bid for power. If one accepts that notions of "culture" are universally female-gendered (Ortner, 1974) then the fact that the feminine and the gendered body have been at the heart of right-wing discursive strategies is far from surprising (Moghadam, 1994b). This exploration of the cross-cultural psyche of gender oppression is certainly relevant in building analytical paradigms. However, what has become obvious in practice is the enormous success with which right-wing movements have managed to mobilize women themselves; and have done so in ways that the feminist movement has been only partially successful.

Feminist scholars are unable to look the other way. What is most vexing is the forced recognition that a large number of right-wing women's activities such as running charities, provision of community services such as schools and youth clubs, medical care for the poor, interventions in domestic abuse situations, focus on the medical needs of women and so on, are at least similar in form (if not in ideology) to feminist ones. Moreover, the position of feminist scholars gets to be doubly contradictory since both feminism and right-wing women's movements are far from monolithic in their forms of organization, their ideological make-up or their methods of agitation. In fact, feminist and right-wing agendas often find themselves uncomfortably close. For example, "cultural" feminists who call for an embrace of motherhood as a critical source of female power or agitate against pornography might actually find themselves in collusion with women of the cultural and religious right (Chodorow, 1978; Dworkin, 1982; Jaggar, 1983; MacKinnon, 1987; Tong, 1998). Therefore, feminist scholars must recognize that when it comes to theorizing right-wing women, the territories of victim, agent, and subject become terribly muddled. In practice, right-wing women regularly play the part of both "victims" and "conspirators" to various forms of patriarchy (Gottlieb 2002: 31).

Therefore, the complicated relationship between right-wing women and feminism must become the centre of feminist inquiry if feminism is to remain relevant (Bacchetta & Power, 2002a; Banerjee, 1996; Basu, 1998b). In fact feminist scholars who have explored *Hindutva* mobilization go so far as to suggest that the feminist movement in India may actually be well-served by learning from the local mobilization strategies and appeals to everyday religiosity of the Hindu right (Banerjee, 1996; Kalpagam, 2000; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995).

### **Religion, Nationalism, and Feminism in the Post-Colonial World**

One has to recognize that neither cultural revivalist movements, nor feminism in the post-colonial world can be easily separated from the anti-colonial agitations of the twentieth century. Feminist scholars have only recently begun to unbundle the gendered notion of "imagined" (Anderson, 1983) political and cultural identities such as the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Nationalist discourse everywhere has drawn heavily on socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity. These constructs serve to shape female and male participation in nation-building (Banerjee, 2003). A political form of religiosity is similarly likely to place issues

of gender, masculinity and femininity at the center of its expression. Therefore, in the case of women of the Hindu right-wing, the dilemma of theorizing women both in the “religious” project and the Indian “nationalist” one is enormously complex.

While it could be argued that right-wing mobilization often roots its ideas of femininity in religious terms which differentiates it from the ‘secular’ constructions of the feminist movement, a close look at non-Western feminisms complicates this presumption. The beginnings of the Indian women’s movement for example, were tied to the anti-colonial struggle where “culture” and its critical component “femininity” were both conceived of in close collaboration with a reformed Hinduism (Chatterjee, 1993; Joshi, 2001). The ‘women’s question’ during this period was thus generally articulated and debated within the context of the Hindu woman, and most of the iconography drew on Hindu goddess and motherhood symbols (Robison, 1999). For the Indian nationalist, much of the debate centered on textualized constructions of an “authentic” Hindu culture and tradition (Mani, 1990; 1993). For the colonial state, the debate focused on issues of the coercion and consent of the female body. Therefore, according to Mani, within the discourse on *sati* (the practice of Hindu widows sacrificing their lives on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands) for example, the female was represented in two mutually exclusive ways; either they were heroines braving the flames of the funeral pyre or else they were victims coerced into the fire (Mani, 1993; 1998). In both cases the invocation of the female corporeal symbol became the site for debate over opposing ideas of Indian culture. Therefore, any discussion of women’s relationships to patriarchal forms of political mobilization in the Indian context must therefore deal with the fact that the ‘women’s question’ in India (and arguably in other colonial and postcolonial settings as well) has historically been tied to the ‘nationalist’ one (Jayawardena, 1986; Mazumdar, 1994; Sangari & Vaid, 1990).

Contemporary Hindu nationalism also derives its motherhood imagery from religion because of the ways in which Hinduism worships mother goddesses (Basu, 1998b). However, as Amrita Basu points out, motherhood imagery is not confined to “communalism” or “fundamentalism” but is a staple of all nationalist movements (Basu 1998b: 177-78). The contemporary, Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People’s Party)<sup>7</sup> asserts an affinity between Hindus and the nation-state based on an “organic” (maternal) conception of citizenship that rests on the notion that Hindus were the original and thus most legitimate inhabitants of India (Basu 1998b:178). The *Shiv Sena*’s discursive constructions have centered on claims to “original” citizenship in the city of Bombay and Maharashtra more generally, going so far as to change the name of the city of Bombay to *Mumbai* in 1995. The latter is derived from the name of what is believed to be local goddess *Mumbadevi*—bringing to the fore the intersections between citizenship, territoriality, homeland, and the feminine symbolic. Therefore, Hindu religious ideas and images have traditionally been critically intertwined with issues of both female ‘emancipation’ as well gendered affirmation in India (Robison, 1999; Sarkar, 1993, 2001; Sinha, 1994). It has also been relevantly argued that the nationalist movement, despite its engagement of women really privileged a hegemonic nationalist cause over real female emancipation (Faulk, 2002; Jayawardena, 1986; Sarkar, 2001; Sinha, 1994). This close link between the women’s question and the nation, and between nation and religion in colonial and post-colonial societies may be important in explaining why third world feminists must analyze women’s oppression in very different ways from the attempts that have arisen in the west under very different circumstances (Jayawardena, 1986; Mohanty, 1991a; Mohanty, Russo, & Russo, 1991; Narayan, 1997).

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<sup>7</sup> Allied with the Shiv Sena and in power at the center until 2004. Currently is the major opposition party.

Mohanty argues that much of feminist scholarship in the western world has assumed certain cross-cultural universalities in the understanding of concepts such as family, marriage, patriarchy etc. (Mohanty et al., 1991). The case of religion has been particularly problematic for western feminist thought. Mohanty argues that a feminist theorization of the postcolonial world must take into account the diverse ways in which the religious and the secular have interacted with discourses of colonialism to produce culturally and historically specific problems (and solutions) for postcolonial women (Mohanty, 1991a; 1991b). Therefore, to analyze “religious” ideological structures as always and primarily responsible for patriarchy and oppression is somewhat misplaced. What Mohanty suggests is that religious discourses and women’s attraction to movements that reify these discourses have to be examined within the social and political relations and practices within which they manifest themselves (Mohanty, 1991b). This approach not only allows feminist scholarship to dislodge religion from universal ideas of patriarchal oppression, but it also allows for the examination of women’s oppression as the cultural and historical product of religious discourse as it interacts with a variety of other social and cultural relations. It is therefore a paradigm for the examination of both agency and oppression.

In the Indian context, ideologies of ‘nationalism’ and *Hindutva* intersect and interact with other socio-political, historical, and economic contexts such as colonial discourse, caste, class, the economic liberalization of the Indian economy, and the increased access of Hindu women to the consumer economy and media imagery. In the case of Hindu women of the *Shiv Sena*, an examination of the nexus between religious belief and practice and the other political-economic imperatives and frustrations of urban life is critical. It is not surprising that many of the *Aghadi* members tend to come from among those who live in spaces that require them to jostle for recognition in the overly crowded city of *Mumbai*. They jostle violently both in their public and private lives. Particularly those who live in crowded *chawls* (multi-family structures) at the edge of slums admit to being the victims of domestic abuse (locally called “wife-beating”) at the hands of husbands burdened with the reality of diminishing opportunities of respectable employment, and inebriated by cheap liquor. I do not intend to suggest a simplistic causality between private violence and its public manifestation as an “empowering” political assertion. I do suggest that the difficulties of the everyday negotiation of urban life and the sexual vulnerabilities that women encounter as they increasingly access public space in dense urban contexts often open up the need to affiliate with movements that promise gender “justice” and class mobility in an environment of perceived threat to both. It is therefore, important to theorize these movements within the context of the social relations that constitute both access and oppression.

### **Extending Ideas of Feminism?**

Scholars writing about other postcolonial feminisms and cultural revivalisms argue that it would help feminist analyses of the postcolony to go beyond the “resistance” and “liberation” paradigm, to contextualize right-wing women’s mobilization as it interacts with other discourses in space and time (Mahmood, 2001; 2005). As Saba Mahmood brilliantly points out in her examination of Egyptian Muslim women in the revivalist mosque movement, that feminist scholars can gain not from searching for the liberatory potential (or lack thereof) of the movement but rather by focusing on “the conceptions of self, moral agency, and discipline that undergird the practices of this nonliberal movement so as to come to an understanding of the desires that animate it” (Mahmood 2001: 203). Kathleen Blee has a similarly nuanced and contextualized study of women of the Ku Klux Klan where she examines the moral agency and

motivations of women who commit often morally deplorable acts within ideologically 'patriarchal' structures (Blee, 1991; 1993).

I would therefore argue that the feminist approaches to women's participation in cultural revivalist movements may be divided into three general areas: the first is the exploration of the construction of independent, and creative discourses that resist, co-opt and transform male discourse and practice, even if they do not challenge the hegemonic male order; the second is the critical emphasis on what Mahmood refers to as women's "moral agency" and subjectivities (Mahmood, 2001). This latter approach also looks at the ways in which women's agency in right-wing movements serves to redefine notions of masculinity and femininity, as much as it opens up new venues for theorizing political and public life (Mahmood, 2001; 2005). The third approach which addresses right-wing women as agents of violence and public aggression is arguably embedded in the first two. However because of the gender ambiguities unleashed by violence, this approach warrants a separate discussion. These three general approaches are discussed in detail below.

### **Right-Wing Women and "Creative" Discourse**

Bacchetta and Power argue that it is critical for feminist scholars to begin to understand the appeal of right-wing, revivalist projects for women because in many cases such movements constitute major obstacles to feminism (Bacchetta & Power, 2002b). While all scholars seem to be confronted with the reality that right-wing movements subscribe to an ideological structure that feminism is trying to combat, there is also a general agreement that they do play a key role in opening up arenas for women's public participation even if they do not generally take on embedded gender hierarchies. Moreover, the dilemma is furthered by the reality that there is a great deal of heterogeneity among movements of the right where the engagement with the gendered subject/object is similarly diverse (Bacchetta & Power, 2002b; Dworkin, 1982; Moghadam, 1994a; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995).

Amrita Basu, who examines three Hindu women's organizations in India attempts to differentiate between "fundamentalist" and "communalist" movements; she suggests that the construction of womanhood is quite different in these two kinds of movements despite the fact that both embed their discourse in some form of Hindu religiosity (Basu, 1998b). In "fundamentalist" movements women often figure as symbols of tradition and continuity with the past, while in "communalist" movements the female figure is a symbol of progress and modernity (Basu 1998b:173). Basu does not go so far as to suggest that "communalism" is a progressive force while "fundamentalism" is the opposite. Instead, she suggests that in the Indian context, both communalism and fundamentalism are responses to the strains of modernity, the erosion of state legitimacy, the integration of the economy into the global capitalist system, and the influx of Western cultural influences. Basu's approach points to how critical it is to explore how women in communalist and fundamentalist movements construct themselves in relation to modernity even as their mobilization is embedded in an overt rhetoric of "tradition" (Mani, 1990). I would argue that *Aghadi* women discursively construct their individual and collective selves from their positions as modern, but increasingly ambivalently gendered subjects. These subjectivities are constituted variably through both masculinized and feminized media and cultural narratives manufactured in Mumbai's hypermodern economy and through its overloaded urban infrastructure.



Therefore while the discursive strategies employed by most right-wings are generally embedded in what feminism would see as “patriarchal” structures of authority, specific scholarly engagements with right-wing women illustrate the great diversity in the expression and the resistance to these dominant ideologies (Galluci, 2002; Gottlieb, 2002). Discursive interventions take two forms. Either, they might represent an insertion of women’s identities and issues into the wider right-wing project, or they may take the form of projects that have critical points of antagonism with male projects. The processes by which right-wing women mobilize to produce these distinctive discourses varies greatly. In many cases they may choose from multiple available symbols to produce both conventional and unconventional models for women’s identity (Bacchetta & Power, 2002a).

In the case of Hindu nationalist women for example, discursive strategies may draw from reconstituted symbolic referents such as Hindu ritualistic practice or Hindu goddesses, and from popular culture and media styles such as Bollywood films, television and music (Ghosh, 2002; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995). Using the speeches of the Hindu nationalist Sadhvi Rithambara as her case study, Ghosh suggests that Rithambara’s discursive strategies draw from the visual consumer culture that *Hindutva* critically depends on. Ghosh suggests that Rithambara’s performances, while working for *Hindutva*, also reveal a covert rage against the Hindu nationalist male cadre (Ghosh, 2002). Andrea Dworkin, in what has become a prominent feminist critique of the right-wing in North America, makes a similar suggestion. She argues that manifestations of anti-other sentiment by right-wing women, is really a sublimation of the frustrations with women’s positions within their own hierarchical, male hegemonic order (Dworkin, 1982). Kathleen Blee, in her examination of women of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States also suggests that “hate” discourse directed against the “other” often takes the form of critiques of the denigration of other women by other men. Blee suggests that these may in fact be looked at as sublimated rage against the sexism of white supremacist men (Blee, 1991; 1993). In many ways, the fact that right-wing women do not outwardly condemn the sexism in their own project but strongly condemn the position of women in other communities is in a perverse and problematic way a stance that feminism cannot ignore. For example, Lesselier, writing about women in the National Front in France illustrates the ways in which National Front Women, despite their strong anti-feminism, criticize the treatment of immigrant women from Africa, Maghreb, and the Caribbean (Lesselier, 2002). Hindu nationalist women in India have taken a similar stance on Muslim men’s treatment of their women in their construction of a debauched, and treacherous “other.”

Generally, revivalist, nationalist, or racist movements derive their power from this construction of an “other,” an enemy against which all right-wing discourse is imagined. Moreover, the “other” is always a gendered site. This other is actually an important trope in theorizing the participation of women in right-wing movements (Bacchetta & Power, 2002a). This trope of otherness is what a number of feminists suggest most critically differentiates religious right-wing mobilization from the secular, feminist one even in cases where their mobilization tactics are very similar. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, in their volume on right-wing women in India, suggest that the most important difference between the women’s movement and right-wing mobilization of women in India is that the women’s movement challenges notions of women’s domination within the family and society, while *Hindutva* ideology places women squarely within the home and propagates a patriarchal model (Sarkar & Butalia, 1995).

I would not disagree with Sarkar and Butalia that Hindutva does reify *ghar- grahasthi* or *ghar-sansar* (two versions of the rhetorical term “home and family”). However, this reification does not in itself necessitate a presumption of the domestic, female ‘non-subject.’ The construction of the private sphere of the “home” across the globe, has itself been a profoundly public and political process where the state, global capitalism, and religion have played equally important roles at different times (Sen & Stivens, 1998; Stivens, 1998). It is probably also a limitation of feminist theorizing to see “domesticity” as outside the realm of both political agency and subjectivity. The “political” can no longer be theorized as confined to an abstract, public space (Gledhill, 1994). If Saba Mahmood’s study of Egyptian women shows that Islamist women have succeeded in extending social and cultural space by entering the realm of Islamic pedagogy, Hindu women’s mobilization in India is a good example of the ways in which “political” space has been extended through practices of domesticity. In the case of the *Aghadi* for example, the “domestic” space of “social work” has had significant ramifications for the ways in which politics is articulated in contemporary Mumbai. This social work is tied to a belligerent politics of assertion at sites that might generally be associated with domesticity: shortages in the vegetable market, children’s school admissions etc.; it is however also in this dispensation of social work that the *Aghadi* has profoundly expanded the possibilities of political space—the bazaar, railway station, the local school, the hospital, the temple, all integral spaces of civic and popular life, have all been encompassed into political space. The realization that “politics” is constituted in everyday places is closely aligned with a feminist analysis; however, the notion of “domesticity,” particularly a domesticity rooted in a form of religiosity is a sticking point. A large part of this unease probably comes from the fact that religious revivalist movements are at least rhetorically adamant about the separation of domesticity from public life. However, right-wing practice is far more ambiguous. Rhetoric notwithstanding, the “domestic” continually gets played out in ‘public’ space. In the case of the *Aghadi* for example, formerly domestic forms of prayer and ritual now get performed by women in public and occupy an important part in constructions of Hindu community as well as in the instigation of violence against religious and ethnic “others.” It could be argued that public, religious ritual, which often remains centered on women, is also a site for innovation as much as it is a site for control over female religiosity. In the case of the *Shiv Sena*, Hindu, Maharashtrian identities are reconstituted and reproduced in the public sphere through public performance that draws its symbols from the larger cultural narratives that Hindu nationalism and modern urban life make available. *Aghadi* women are deeply cognizant of those cultural narratives that might produce the most affect in performance and they will often choose and reject those that are the most potent. In fact in my observations, several *Aghadi* leaders have built their political futures through ‘domestic’ rituals that are rooted in a Maharashtrian Hindu religiosity but in their public practice provide a site for the local consolidation of political campaigns.

### **The Right-Wing and Women’s Agency and Subjectivity**

“Agency” is a critical site for feminist theorizing (Gardiner, 1995; McNay, 2000). Some feminist theorists who examine women in the right-wing have suggested that the notion of agency constituted by feminist analysis is inadequate and limiting; this model of feminist agency does not allow for the understanding of the lives and agency of women whose desires are shaped by nonliberal positions (Mahmood 2001: 203). Neither does it allow for the agency of women who consciously constitute themselves through travel between both religious and feminist domains (Karam, 2002). Mahmood suggests that a revised notion of “agency” should “think of

agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2001: 203). Feminist scholarship that addresses women’s participation in the religious right has much to gain by focusing on the multiple sites of women’s agency, albeit within structures of domination to understand how women conform to, resist, and subvert their own domination (Moghadam, 1994a). Mahmood’s analysis of Islamist women suggests that the mosque movement in Egypt has allowed women the conceptual and practical resources with which to enter the sacred spaces of Islamic pedagogy at the same time that it has affected transformations in what is deemed appropriate social and political conduct in Egypt (Mahmood, 2001; 2005). For Mahmood, it is important to examine even objectionable practices that from a progressive point of view seem to condone forms of domination. It is integral to understand the motivations, desires and practices for people for whom these movements are important. It is only by exploring these “traditions” within the contexts of everyday life that they are embedded in that that the complexities of these traditional, “patriarchal” movements can be understood (Mahmood 2001: 225). The argument here seems very relevant from the perspective of an anthropology of women of the right-wing: that “agency” must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the context for the enactment of this agency (Mahmood 2001: 212). Mahmood suggests that the real problem lies in the fact that generally feminist engagements with the right-wing burden under the problematic of feminism as both an analytical and a political project (Butler & Scott, 1992). This privileges the idea of a universal autonomous will and resistance to domination over considerations of ‘moral agency (Mahmood, 2001). This is a provocative argument. It seems to suggest that the feminist project must now go beyond its contributions to engage agency and to examine how agency is deeply embedded in and enabled by specific temporal and cultural processes.

In many ways, Paola Bacchetta’s effort to locate Hindu women’s agency within the cultural and historical contexts that it is embedded in, is similar to Mahmood’s. Bacchetta attempts to theorize right-wing women’s agency outside the context of existing feminist scholarship. Bacchetta takes on dominant feminist analyses that generally compare right-wing women and feminists. She suggests that this is not as useful an exercise. Instead, in order to understand the specificity of agency, Bacchetta takes a “gender comparative approach.” She suggests that an exclusive focus on the discourses of women of the right-wing without an accompanying analysis of the male discourses that they interact with fails to address notions of agency that are incomparable to feminist notions. Therefore, rather than comparing right-wing women to feminists, she compares Hindu nationalist women’s discourse to that of their male counterparts. She looks at the Hindu nationalist *Rashtriya Sevika Samiti* (National Women’s Service Corps) to suggest that the members’ agency, though individually variable, can be understood as *gender-supplemental* agency in relation to their male counterparts. Therefore, the *Samiti’s* agency is constituted in relation to an already completed male discursive agenda. It is substitutive in the sense that the *Samiti’s* version of Hindu nationalism sometimes replaces (for its women) male discourse and practice with its own. However, the fact that the *Samiti* remains structurally subordinate to its male counterpart, illustrates Bacchetta’s conclusion that the *Samiti’s* agency certainly does produce some form of “gender equilibrium” though not gender equality (Bacchetta 2002).

It must be therefore be recognized, that beyond the periodic cooption of “masculinity” and the rejection of purely “feminine” versions of practice lies the reality that right-wing movements, despite women’s involvement, continue to separate their male and female wings to

ensure that women are generally structurally subordinate (Bacchetta & Power, 2002b; Gottlieb, 2002; Koonz, 1987). There does seem to be some indication that most right-wing movements across the world are segregated by sex from their male counterparts. Feminist scholars have argued that this right-wing sex segregation has two main consequences: on one hand it excludes women from overall organizational power. This is documented quite clearly as far as the Hindu right is concerned. Despite the high visibility of women in *Hindutva* mobilization, the top level leadership remains male. (Bacchetta, 2002; Banerjee, 1996). In the *Shiv Sena* each appointed post in the male wing has its counterpart in the *Aghadi*. This parallel organization ensures that women and men are carefully segregated in the political sphere; however *Aghadi* leadership, despite their 'parallel' posts and a great deal of interaction and sharing of local responsibilities between the male and female wings, are visibly structurally subordinate to their male colleagues. On the other hand however, the argument is that sex-segregation in fact enables women to "forge their own discourse, practice, and modes of solidarity in ways that sometimes have the potential to threaten the overall male-dominated right itself by contesting male power" (Bacchetta and Power 2002a:5).

A feminist analysis of "agency" particularly "agency" in gender-differentiated movements of the religious right may benefit from a theory of gender "practice" that examines women's agency from the point of view of the "game." Sherry Ortner for example, contributes to a theory of gendered "practice" using this notion of the game (Ortner, 1996). She addresses the problem of how to think about women's agency and practice in relationship to a hegemonic male dominant social order (Ortner 1996:16). She argues that there is a general tendency to see women as identified with male games or as pawns in male games with no autonomous agency or intentionality. Even if women have their own projects, these largely embody a male point of view. In order to explore agency, Ortner uses the notion of the "game" as the methodological unit of practice. She argues that this methodological stance illuminates the mutual determinations of agents and structures; that players are agents and intense strategizers who constantly stretch the game even as they perform it and the simultaneous fact that players are defined and constructed (though never entirely contained) by the game (Ortner, 1996). This notion of gender as constituted through the strategic manipulation of dominant rules is useful in looking at the ways in which women of the Hindu right play or don't play the "games" of their male counterparts. In the case of women of the *Aghadi*, one might argue that it is through their own version of the performance of the game of "daring"<sup>8</sup> that they reconstitute masculine and feminine identities at the same time that they mark out public spaces as their own. For example, in most cases the practice of "daring" is in fact directed against patriarchal forms of power. So many of the women I talked to had stories about how the "social work" they conduct in their communities is greatly furthered by the flashing of the *Shiv Sena* card. This card is perceived as a form of social distinction like no other particularly when used against traditional institutions of law, order, and social support. These institutions are widely referred to as though they have failed the average citizen of Bombay, particularly women. Several women narrate how their *Shiv Sena* cards have allowed them to circumvent police authority, and gain immunity from arrest during their participation in public protest. Many also talk about the card being used as a means to get laboring mothers and sick children into hospitals of their choice in a city where hospital beds are terribly limited – in all cases I was told: "we show the card and they know we are separate." Whether deference from police or others is rooted in a cowering fear (as most *Aghadi*

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<sup>8</sup> "Daring" is a term used very widely by Sena women in self-description; it is used in two ways. For example "I am very daring;" and "We do a lot of daring."

women seem to assert) or simply in a desire to avoid what is now widely recognized as the *Shiv Sena's* nuisance value is rather irrelevant. What matters is that *Shiv Sena* women seem to see themselves as citizen care-takers of their city of Mumbai. There is a deep pride among these women in the fact that male dominated institutions such as the police force, medical community and bureaucrats can be forced into submission at their hands. Therefore, the inscription of “daring” becomes detachable and capable of operating as a mobile cultural resource that can be transported through both male and female bodies. (See Diawara 1988 cited in (Skeggs, 2004). The fact is that a great deal of the *Aghadi's* mobilization has been around solutions to the immediate problems of urban women but feminists scholars would argue that the social niche it creates challenges the notion of female emancipation that is the central motif of the feminist movement (Banerjee, 1996; Setalvad, 1995).

Feminist theorists who examine women's participation in right-wing movements admit the need to recognize that one of the most striking features of right-wing women is that their subjectivities are often constructed out of a well negotiated system of “double standards” (Bacchetta & Power, 2002b; Scheck, 2002; Vervenioti, 2002). These authors suggest that there is a significant gap between the ways in which female leaders of right-wing movements live their own lives as individuals and the subjectivities that they propose for other women, particularly “other” women. While it must be acknowledged that the often unconventional behavior of female leadership might actually be protected by class (and caste) privilege it does generally remain obvious that “in many cases right-wing women, leaders and activists alike, fight for societies that would totally eliminate women who behave as they do” (Bacchetta and Power 2002a:6). In the personal stories that lie at the heart of Karam's examination of Islamist women in Egypt, she illustrates how the three subjects of her study locate themselves in different positions in relation to the feminist project while all professing a dedication to women's empowerment and even in some cases acknowledging women's oppression. However, like Bacchetta and Power she suggests that there are critical contradictions between the assertive and public role that these women take on and the private obedient role that they advocate for other Muslim girls and women (Karam, 2002).

### **Women of the Right-Wing and Public Aggression**

Amrita Basu suggests that Hindu nationalism differs significantly from earlier forms of community mobilization in India with respect to its gendered imagery and the place of real women in two ways (Basu, 1995d). First, a number of women occupy a greater prominence in Hindu nationalism than women ever did in the anti-colonial nationalist movement; second female leadership in the *Hindutva* movements does not advocate the pacifism articulated in the Gandhian version of women's mobilization (Basu, 1995d). To the first point of the prominence of Hindu nationalist leadership, is an issue that Basu touches on only tangentially in her discussion of *Hindutva* women's oratory: that it is impossible to ignore the mass-mediated context within which these women present themselves as well as the mass-mediated narratives that they consciously draw from in their construction of often militant, non-traditional gendered personas. Therefore, the three Hindu nationalist female leaders that Basu examines, all seem to locate themselves somewhat outside the patriarchal narrative both in their public personas as much as in their embodiment of “femininity” (Basu, 1995d). For *Shiv Sena* women the struggles against injustice of the Bollywood hero Sharukh Khan (rather ironically a Muslim), the grit of India's rising tennis star Sania Mirza (also ironically a Muslim), the bravery of India's celebrated policewoman Kiran Bedi, and the everyday verbal machinations of the characters in the spate of

“serials” (soap operas) on Indian television, provide discursive fodder quite as often as the iconography of Hindu mother goddesses.

It has been argued that the manner in which citizenship in the city of *Mumbai* and the state of Maharashtra as secured by the Shiv Sena, along with its maverick, anti-establishment form of performance has given young men an assertive, often violent way of being “urban” (Hansen 2001). I would argue that Shiv Sena women have co-opted this form of social and political practice and in doing so have transformed it. They have succeeded in constructing an autonomous space of urban assertion that both subverts and conforms to class and gender convention. This cooption of a physically and verbally militant or what I have referred to earlier as a “daring” persona has been critical to the *Aghadi*’s construction of a new form of women’s politics; and a key practice for these women has been the cooption of violence—what has been referred to as the feminization of violence (Banerjee, 1996). The *Shiv Sena* is an interesting organization in that it operates both inside and outside the formal state apparatus (Hansen, 2001). The large majority of *Shiv Sena* women vocally shuns “politics” and see themselves as “social workers” but social workers with a difference--- the ability to command and coerce all that come in their way. This self-perception is significant since it seems in many ways to provide these women the ability to imagine themselves into a violent, “dada” persona that is modern, while at the same time proudly Maharashtrian and Hindu. “Dada” most literally means grandfather in Hindi, but is colloquially used (and owes much of its cache to the Bollywood film industry) to refer to a criminalized subculture (Hansen 2001). *Dadagiri* as it is referred to locally, is “a style of exercising political and social power that invokes images of a masculine, often violent local strongman whose real clout lies in self-made networks of loyalty rather than in institutionalized action and discourse” (Hansen 2001:72). The *Shiv Sena* in general has made the image of the “dada” its central motif (Hansen, 2001). The local patronage systems that Shiv Sena women construct as part of their social work offerings, creates opportunities for them to circumvent formal institutions in “getting things done.” The consistent rhetoric among those I talked to, of engagement in non-institutional action, often bordering on criminal acts, sadly reflects the fact that rather than resigning themselves to the misogynist nature of formal state and bureaucratic institutions *Shiv Sena* women have devised their own ways of “getting things done.” Moreover, they have co-opted this image of the local strongman to carve out a space of respect and fear, particularly vis-à-vis other women. I have met and traveled with Shiv Sena women on Bombay’s local trains that connect their workplaces in elite downtown locations to their suburban homes. An aside here—the Bombay suburbs are as far removed as can be from the well-manicured American suburb. In fact, in most of Bombay’s suburbs, the competition over space is far more brutal than it is in downtown city locations and the sheer act of getting to work and home is a negotiation of an urban space like few others in the world. Getting on and off a local train, particularly the “ladies” compartment is a lesson in a street and muscle culture that the Shiv Sena women have incorporated into their daily lives. The ladies coach tends to be brutally crowded given the limited number of these attached to every train in Bombay-- rather unreflective of the increases in the female workforce over the last decade. Strong bursts of violence, both verbal and physical against anyone blocking the way in or out of the train are a common occurrence and *Shiv Sena* women are particularly feared in this jostle. The women who travel these trains everyday know each other well and *Shiv Sena* women are well marked. Several fellow-passengers mention how they allow the *Shiv Sena* women to get off first since “otherwise there will be a big *danga* (scuffle).” This resort to regular assertions in daily life is indicative of an

assertion of a certain urban right—the right to safe passage home, a right which the infrastructure has denied the women who travel the trains everyday.

Whether this cooption of *dadagiri* means “emancipation” is questionable. The *Shiv Sena*’s key rhetorician Bal Thackeray and the party’s press mouthpiece *Saamna*<sup>9</sup> in fact continually propound the value of female action through *ghar-sansar* (home and family). It is true that the discourse of *ghar-sansar* is rampant among *Aghadi* women and to all outward appearances most display all the accoutrements of appropriate female Hindu-Maharashtrian, middle-class respectability. Even women who live in over-crowded *chawls* and slums are in clean, ironed/starched saris, well-oiled hair and the ubiquitous *mangalsutra* (black and gold beaded necklace) the class mediated symbol of marriage or *suhaag*-- somehow representative of the aspiration to outward appearances of respectability even within the context of tragically falling home conditions. However, what is most interesting about these women is that even in their role of defenders of “culture” they have found ways that make the assertion of culture through *dadagiri* unproblematic; culture and women’s honor are discursively cast as two sides of the same coin and “*mara-mari* (hitting and attacking) in the defense of honor is perfectly justified (Interview with *Aghadi* member).”

Banerjee’s examination of women of the Hindu right uses a feminist analysis to explore the ways by which “gender” personas of the Hindu right are negotiated through often violent means (Banerjee, 1996; 2003) While she acknowledges the masculinity of Hindu nationalist movements (what she terms “masculine Hinduism”) she draws from feminist theory to suggest that “masculine” Hinduism does necessarily preclude women’s agency. In fact, feminist analysis has generally been insistent that “sex” and “gender” are two quite separate constructs (Butler, 1990a, 1990b; Di Stefano, 1991; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Rosaldo, 1974). Therefore, women simply join the project of “masculine Hinduism” by appropriating those masculine traits that are deemed appropriate by the nationalist project. This appropriation of “masculinity” rather than rendering women invisible in the Hindu nationalist project, actually allows women to negotiate their way through culturally dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity in ways that help them avoid censure (Banerjee, 2000; 2003). Women who are part of right-wing organizations such as the *Aghadi*, for example have co-opted these forms of assertive “militaristic” political participation quite broadly in their forms of speech, their presence at *morchas* (public protest marches), their active participation in *mara-mari* (hitting and attacking) and their fearlessness in the face of arrest and police violence.

This in many ways illustrates the ironic reversal of strategies between anti-colonial nationalism and contemporary Hindu nationalism. In the former case womanhood was constructed in terms of “feminine” iconographies (Sarkar, 2001) while in the latter case militaristic metaphors intersect with feminine goddess and mother icons in order to fashion women’s political participation that is often militant. Therefore, women in the Hindu nationalist movement have entered the political sphere as both “warriors” and as “mothers.” They construct themselves as warriors while at the same time focusing on “motherhood” as the critical trope of the nation. This delicate balance points to the inherent ambiguities of female participation in *Hindutva* movements. Banerjee suggests that the motherhood trope might actually become a way for Hindu women to mediate the cultural anxieties that arise out of their public participation in militant projects and the threat that public participation entails for the gender status quo (Banerjee, 2003). This in many ways is similar to Bacchetta and Power’s arguments that right-

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<sup>9</sup> Literally translated as “confrontation.”

wing women may be theorized from a feminist perspective of empowerment but not real emancipation (Bacchetta, 2004; Bacchetta & Power, 2002b).

In conclusion, feminist debates over the right-wing have revealed the immense ambiguities in a feminist theorization of women in right-wing, religious movements. In the Indian context, in particular, the rise of right-wing and identity politics and its mass mobilization of women has created some terribly vexing issues for feminist activists and feminist scholars alike. Not only has this rise brought to the forefront debates over secularism, but has also provoked questions of how to frame a “feminist” politics in a multiethnic, pluralist society. Most critically, it has also raised the troubling issue of whether the increasing mobilization of right-wing women by conservative political and cultural organizations such as the *Shiv Sena* can actually be seen as part of the feminist movement itself or whether it needs to be problematized quite separate from it (Bacchetta & Power, 2002a; Basu, 1998b; Kalpagam, 2000).

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