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Towards a Politics of Pain: Building Solidarities, Breaking Silences in Contemporary Chhattisgarh, India

By Panchali Ray¹

Abstract

This essay is based on a series of interviews with Soni Sori, an activist, educationist, and a political figure, who has become the face of *adivasi* (tribal) resistance to state-corporate acquisition of community land for industry, in Chhattisgarh, India. Soni Sori, who is a prominent figure in the resistance movement against State atrocities on poor *adivasi* farmers, was accused of Left extremism, and subsequently arrested and sexually tortured in police custody. In her own words, this was to shame her into silence and prevent her from participating in public life, again. In this essay, I ask how does pain enter political discourses and animate the resistance around *jal-jangal-zameen* (water-forest-land). Soni's post-rape narrative, where she embraces the identity of a raped woman, does not draw from a discourse on chastity or shame and dishonor; instead, she powerfully questions the dominant perceptions of rape as sexualised violence, which extinguishes the subject, either through silence or death. In fact, the discursive representation of the raped woman residing in the margins of society, in need of rehabilitation—the object of sympathy or the abject victim—the pathetic 'other', is central to both questions of justice in the legal realm, as well as healing processes. In this essay, I suggest that there are different modes of healing that do not necessarily draw from such patriarchal constructions of the subject, one of which is politicising the wound, rather than fetishising it. In this essay, I argue that moving from feelings of shame associated with loss of honour that primarily define the violated woman as a victim, to acknowledging pain and making it central to healing processes, can become a feminist response to hegemonic modes of understanding violations and seeking justice.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Shame and Honour, Politics of Pain, Soni Sori, Chhattisgarh, India.

Introduction

Historically, India has been home to a number of vibrant democratic movements and peasant uprisings, particularly around the question of land, against feudal landlords and state apparatuses, where women have always played a central and a crucial role (Stree Shakti Sangathana 1989; Majumdar 2011; Panjabi 2017). In the contemporary state of Chhattisgarh, there has been a strong movement against state-corporate acquisition of land, which draws its strength and legitimacy from this long history, beginning from *adivasi* (tribal) resistance to colonial powers. This essay critically engages with questions of affect in trying to understand transformational politics and solidarity activism. I examine the anti land-grab movement in contemporary Chhattisgarh, where *adivasi* men and women have been actively resisting the state-corporate nexus that seeks to displace them from their landholdings, and thus, their traditional way

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of life. I argue that the fight against land acquisition is a people's movement, rather than a strictly women's movement, despite the large number of women who are central to its unfolding. And yet, it is one of the few mass based movements that have addressed sexual violence, and made it a pivotal issue. While there have been many fascinating and insightful discussions on sexual violence as a tool of domination and intimidation, there has hardly been any analysis on how solidarities are built around such violence/violations. I have based this essay on interviews with Soni Sori, a well-known figure who has emerged as the face of *adivasi* resistance, in Chhattisgarh,² and I raise questions on how survivors of sexual violence have worked around the coordinates of shame and honour that silence them from articulating sexualised violation as a ground for solidarities. Thus, I ask how does pain enter political discourses and animate the resistance around *jal-jangal-zameen* (water-forest-land). I focus on Soni's post-rape narrative, where she embraces the identity of a raped woman that does not draw from a discourse on chastity, shame or dishonour and, therefore, powerfully questions the dominant perceptions of rape as sexualised violence that inevitably leads to the extinction of the subject, either through silence or death. Globally, the discursive representation of the raped woman residing in the margins of society, in need of rehabilitation—either as the object of sympathy or the abject victim—the pathetic 'other', is central to both questions of justice in the legal realm, as well as healing processes. In this essay, I suggest, that there are different modes of healing that do not necessarily draw from such patriarchal constructions of the subject, one of which is politicising the wound rather than fetishising it. I argue that, moving from feelings of shame associated with loss of honour that primarily defines the violated woman as a victim, to acknowledging pain and making it central to the healing processes, can become a feminist response to hegemonic modes of understanding violations and seeking justice. A politics of pain would reanimate the relation between the subject and the collective, thus transforming pain from an individual and lonely experience, to one of affective resistance. While many agree that emotions, such as a sense of injustice and rage often play a major role in bringing people together (Ahmed, 2004; Sundar 2012; Massumi 2015), I take the politics of affect as not incidental, but central to the life of resistance movements. I draw my understanding of affect, such as anger and rage as central to movements against injustices, from feminists, such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Sarah Ahmed (2004). Both examine how the politics of emotion play a crucial role in bringing together people, even if contingently.

The Context of Chhattisgarh: The Emergence of *Jal-jangal-zameen*

The economic growth of India as a 'superpower', and a force to reckon with necessitates an opening up of markets, resources, and land to foreign, as well as Indian multi-national companies; and while the story of its success is lauded in mainstream news and glossy paged business magazines, the violence spawned by development never makes it to the primetime news hour. India is neither unique nor singular. The last few decades have observed a movement of mining and heavy industries from Western Europe towards East Europe and Asian countries, as well as southwards to Africa. While the language of capitalism couches these processes as 'development' and 'foreign investment', for those in the receiving end, it occasions the most rampant dispossession and violent exploitation. Ranging from ecological destruction,

²Soni's persecution by the Government of Chhattisgarh, her arrest and custodial torture and sexual assault has been widely reported. For more details, see the website <https://sonisori.wordpress.com/> which has both written text and video clipping with Soni's interviews, describing her work, the manner in which she was persecuted, custodial and sexual torture, and her continuing fight for justice for her people.

displacement and dispossession of local inhabitants, and/or rapid suppression of democratic movements that come together to protect land, these processes have precipitated a destruction and decimation of the large *adivasi* population, particularly in Central India. The mineral wealth lying in the belly of the mountains of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand is being opened up to an unprecedented scale of mining and metal manufacture by Indian, as well as foreign companies. The state of Chhattisgarh has been in the news for more than a decade now. Bifurcated from Madhya Pradesh in 2000, it has 45 percent forest cover with rich deposits of iron minerals. There are more than 29 varieties of mineral, and some of the most sought after, are gold, iron ore, limestone, dolomite, coal, diamonds, limestone and bauxite. In fact, the dolomite deposit in Chhattisgarh consists of 24 percent of deposits in the country. The world's best quality of iron ore is supposedly found in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. 32 percent of Chhattisgarh's population consists of *adivasi* communities, which are dependent on land and forest for life and livelihood, specifically collection of gum, *lac*, *tendu* leaves, fruits, herb, honey etc, apart from fishing, hunting, and subsistence agriculture (Kujur 2008).

The states of central India, have long witnessed contestations between multinational corporations which have been trying to acquire land for mining, and local inhabitants who have been resisting this acquisition. The question of land is central to most *adivasi* struggles, rights, and assertions in contemporary India. In fact, land, has been central to most mass-based movements in the country (*Narmada Bachao Andolan* in Gujarat, *Singur-Nandigram* in West Bengal, and anti-POSCO movement in Orissa). Similarly, the rallying cry in Chhattisgarh is *jal-jangal-jameen*. The resistance of Chhattisgarhi people to land acquisition is not new, it exists from the colonial era. The emergence and consolidation of *adivasi* politics and identity, in the Bastar district, can be traced to the British domination of the erstwhile princely state. There have been numerous revolts by the local *adivasi* population against colonial powers, and their exploitative economic policies, the earliest being traced to 1866. However, the most famous was the Bastar revolt (1910), when the *adivasi* population rose up in arms against a British garrison stationed there. Scholars have argued that this anti-colonial movement resulted in the projection of a nascent *adivasi* identity, and this event, referred to as *bhunkal* (earthquake), established Bastar as a major battleground for *adivasi* revolt during the colonial period (Sundar 1997). With Indian independence, the local dispossessed monarch continued resisting the central government's endeavour to set up mining ore factories.

It is estimated, that by 2004, ten major projects have already been completed for which more than two lakh acres of land had been acquired, and more than 238 villages affected. None of the villagers (all *adivasi* villages) have yet received compensation. Since then, the numbers have gone up, as more and more 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MoU) are being signed, and industries, mines and dams being constructed (Kujur 2008). This 'development induced displacement' has been put forward by the media, government reports, and corporate lobbies as a 'mere' hitch or 'collateral damage' in turning the country from a feudal, 'backward' nation to a modern, industrialised developed one. However, even the most generous 'R & R packages' (relief and rehabilitation) offer only money and promise of employment (which in practice are rarely kept), and not land for land (as stated by the international bodies, such as, the International Labour Organisation) (Felix and Das, 2006). For the Chhattisgarhi, the myth of development has been further exposed by the two major projects of the 1960s: the Dandakaranya resettlement project and the Bailadilla iron ore mine. On one of my visits to the district of Bastar, I met Sukal Prasad Nag, a long time CPI (Communist Party of India) activist and currently an AAP (Aam Admi Party)

candidate, from Dantewada district. On being asked whether the *adivasi* resistance to land acquisition had anything to do with lack of faith in the government, amongst others, he says

The two projects did not generate employment to any of the local inhabitants. All those employed, were people from metropolitan cities. The villagers had voluntarily given land, thinking it will empower them and their communities, and they were cheated. Instead, the rivers Sankini and Dankini now run red with industrial waste, and the local soil is destroyed, thus adversely affecting farming. In the 1960s, under the leadership of the ex-*raja*, Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo, people protested, asking for land, access to forests, and cheaper rice. Pravir was assassinated in 1966, and the protests eventually faded out.

For more than a decade, Chhattisgarh has been consistently in the news, labeled as a ‘security’ problem with the emergence of armed groups belonging to strands of the radical Left. No doubt, over the past three decades, the Maoist ‘insurgency’ or the armed guerilla struggle has expanded remarkably in India, particularly in the central tribal belt. In fact, insurgent activity is most likely to take place in areas, where *adivasis* retain control of their land, as it clashes with colonial and neo-colonial state’s desire to control forests and natural resources. Both government reports and academic scholarship indicate that Maoist ‘insurgency’ has expanded most markedly in areas inhabited by *adivasis*. According to the Minister of Home Affairs, the ‘insurgents’ are currently active in 223 of India’s 626 districts (2005), and the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had repeatedly described the ‘insurgency’ as ‘the single biggest internal-security challenge ever faced by our country’ (Kennedy and King 2013).

To counter the Maoist ‘insurgency’ or the increasing presence of the ‘Naxalites’, who were supposedly unleashing violence on ‘innocent villagers’, the Government of Chhattisgarh formed the infamous *Salwa Judum*. Literally meaning ‘purification drive’ in the Gondi dialect, the *Salwa Judum* was projected as a spontaneous uprising of the local people against Maoist forces. Its main focus was on evicting *adivasi* people from their villages and relocating them in ‘rehabilitation camps’ run by Special Police Officers (SPO). The SPOs were local unemployed youth, who were given guns, and INR 1500 as allowances; in fact, some fact-finding teams have reported that these desperate people were recruited, made to work long arduous hours, and given the carrot of being absorbed into the regular police force, if they were able to capture Naxalites (Punwani 2007). Thus, the bogey of ‘Maoist insurgency’ justified and legitimised the arming of local unemployed youth to turn on their own, burn and loot villages, and thus clear the path for land acquisition. The atrocities committed by the *Salwa Judum*, the incarceration of Dr. Binayak Sen on trumped up charges,³ and the sexual violence inflicted on Soni Sori while in custody, has brought media attention and international pressure on the government to stop such rampant human rights abuse, but with no avail. Though the *Salwda Judum* has been disbanded, and the practices of recruiting local villagers as paramilitary without any training, recognition, or adequate pay and protection has been stopped (Sundar 2016), reports keep pouring in of human rights violations, illegal arrests, detaining of activists, hounding out of journalists, brutal torture and murder of *adivasi* population,

³ Dr. Binayak Sen, a doctor by profession and civil rights activists, also one of the first to investigate and report the Salwa Judum, was arrested in charges of being a Naxalite and imprisoned. To read his interview see, https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/breakfast-with-bs-dr-binayak-sen-112052900030_1.html Accessed on 16th September 2018.

looting and burning of villages, sexual assault and rape of women etc. So for example, though the report 'Bearing Witness: Sexual Violence in south Chhattisgarh' (2017), written by a group of feminists and published by the network 'Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression' documents the massive scale of sexual violence and human rights violations, there has been no equivalent reporting in mainstream media.

I went to Chhattisgarh, to meet the intrepid and courageous Soni Sori, who has emerged as the face of resistance by the *adivasi* community. As I took a bus from the town of Jagdalpur to Geedam to meet Soni, I could not help but wonder on the beauty of the countryside. My bus made way through rocky terrains, through rain soaked forests and mountains, and as I breathed the pristine air, it was hard to believe that such a paradise has so much of violence in its underbelly. This research project lies at the cusp of feminist epistemology and politics, and the way they inform each other. I read Soni's activism as an embodied language of resistance that challenges both hegemonic knowledge formations on sexual violence and its aftermath, as well as interrogates the relation between the self and the collective. I reached Soni, through a larger network of feminist scholars and researchers, who have and continues to work in Chhattisgarh. Bela Bhatia, a remarkable scholar and activist, who has been tirelessly working to expose state atrocities on tribal communities, introduced me to Soni, and it was based on this introduction that she agreed to meet me. It was these spaces of solidarities and sharing nurtured by feminists and activists, where I was so gracefully allowed to enter, that further brings to fore how epistemology twines with politics. Whereas mainstream epistemology remains focused on the subject-object binary and strong objectivity, it was interdependency and common solidarities that forged this research project. My attempt was not to investigate sexual violence, but rather understand how a collective politics can emerge from the isolating experience of sexual violence. This knowledge production was not just centered around Soni's contextualisation of violence, violation, and the world she inhabits, but also from the understanding how feminist spaces are created, sustained and shared, based on trust, solidarities and a collective goal of achieving justice.

State Repression and Sexual Violence: (Re) viewing the Debates

Violence against women, particularly sexual violence is widely prevalent and universally recognised, yet paradoxically, it continues to be invisibilised, trivialised and normalised. Though, globally, there has been a considerable collectivising around sexual violence that has garnered international attention, such as the 'Me Too' and 'Time's Up' movements, the gendered violence embedded in the quotidian continues to be legitimised by the close working of the family, community and the state. While, internationally, violence against women has been recognised as a significant violation of human rights (McQuigg, 2018), and nation-states have responded with an increase in penal, punitive or constitutional safeguards, yet, whether in 'normal' times or in times of conflict, perpetrators of violence enjoy considerable impunity and social legitimacy (Kannabiran 2005). Feminists worldwide have grappled with both methodological, as well as analytic tools to understand the pernicious nature and effect of sexual violence, as well as strategies to resist including recourses in the legal realm. Rape, particularly has been theorised as an act of systematic violence against women, legitimised and normalised by a phallogocentric system. The enunciation of the discourse on rape emerged from a recognition of women's bodies as sexualised sites of control, and domination that reinforces male power (Griffin 1971; Brownmiller 1975). From perpetuating and solidifying 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980), as a process of intimidation (Ortner and Whitehead 1981) to violating community honour (Iveković 2005), sexual

violence is conceptualised as pre-emptive, retributive, and a tool to mark the body of the feminine 'other'. In the context of national security, rape is a legitimate, in fact, even a necessary tool to punish and 'fix' women who are perceived as a threat to national integrity and security (Enloe 2000). In India, rape is theorised and politicized, not just as an expression of patriarchy, but located at the interstices of structural and institutional social and political inequalities (Chakravarti 1982). It is now commonplace knowledge that women's bodies are sites of contesting cultures, as well as the mediums of cultural transmissions, and signifier of cultural purity. In South Asia, women's bodies and sexualities have been intricately linked to honour and shame of the family and the community (Viswanath 1997). In fact, sexual violence does not necessarily operate on existing inequalities, but actively scripts such inequalities into being. Rape constitutes subjectivities, reinforces feminine vulnerabilities, and constitutes victimhood; the 'gendered grammar of violence' uses existing social inequalities to produce notions of both illegitimate and legitimate violence (Marcus 1992).

The relation between the state, and violence against women, is a contentious one. From the 1970s, the women's movements have had as a central node, violence against women, ranging from rape, dowry deaths, and domestic violence to female foeticide. Particularly, the Mathura Rape case (1972) proved to be a turning point, when autonomous women's groups came together to build the anti-rape campaigns, which brought to the forefront the issue of institutionalised violence, committed by multiple state apparatuses, including the police and the army (Flavia 1993, Kumar, 1993). If the decades of the 70s and 80s saw consciousness raising, street meetings, and campaigning by women's groups, the 90s witnessed lobbying, advocacy, and attempts to sensitise institutions, bureaucracy and different arms of the state (Kannabiran and Menon 2007). The State has always had an ambivalent relation with women's issues, sometimes taking on the role of a protector, mediator and a facilitator of women's empowerment, particularly through legal reform (Kumar 1993; Sen 2000), however, feminist scholars have expressed skepticism on the overwhelming reliance of the women's movements on the state and its enactment of protective laws (Agnes 1998). There is no doubt, that the dependence on state reinforces it as the male protector, and the woman as the vulnerable-dependent victim-citizen. The last couple of decades have also brought the role of the state in perpetrating violence to light; for example, the systematic deployment of sexual violence to break political resistance is widely reported (Batool et al 2016, Sundar 2016). Whether in Kashmir, Manipur, Gujarat, West Bengal, or Chhattisgarh, the state has secured its foundations and punished dissenters through sexual violence, as part of what has been termed as 'sexual terrorism' (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2002). The specific targeting of women for sexual violence, in both 'normal' times or in communal/ethnic unrest, as political activists, or even as women standing in the way of the state's agenda, stems from both, a biological, as well as social notion of the woman's body as rapeable.

In Chhattisgarh, the government's responses to the movements around *jal-jangal-zameen* have been of brutal killings, intimidation, rape and murder. In 2015, just in the month of October, there were reports of 45 cases of women stripped, beaten, and gang raped (MATIDARI 2016). Even now, women are coming out to the media with their experiences of sexual violence and assault in police custody.⁴ When the rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey in December 2012,⁵ witnessed large scale

⁴<https://thewire.in/98084/chattisgarh-police-allegedly-rape-16-women-nhrc-issues-notice/> accessed on 11.01.2018

⁵The gang-rape and subsequent death of young student in the capital city of Delhi led to massive public protests which was covered by both national and international news. The uproar it caused led to the setting up of the Justice Verma Committee headed by J. S. Verma, a former Chief Justice of India, whose report resulted in the passing of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013.

protests, by men and women across caste, class and communities, unprecedented in the history of our country, many thought feminism had at last breached its 'elite' walls and reached the 'people'. The impression did not last long; subsequent rape of Dalit, *adivasi*, working class, trans, and queer women did not elicit much protest, except the usual suspects—women's groups, queer groups and civil rights activists. Placed in context of Chhattisgarh, violence against women—including rape of women who resist exploitation is framed as 'law and order' and/or 'national security' issue. Conversing with Natash Rather and Ifrah Butt, two young researchers and activists from Kashmir,⁶ I was given a vivid description of how the Indian army while gang raping Kashmiri women in a village as part of a 'search' operation chanted '*Bharat Mata ki Jai*' (Long Live Mother India). This peculiar nature of nationalism, which is interlinked with ideologies of misogyny, insists that those women who transgress gendered norms, and cross limits need to be punished. Who are the women who are being raped in Chhattisgarh? Women resisting economic exploitation, refusing to give up land, and those who are perceived to be cooperating with members of banned communist groups; generally, all women who are perceived to be standing in the way of 'national growth and security'. Apart from that, the identity *adivasi* brings forth the discursive construction of the 'tribal'. From the colonial archives to contemporary public discourses, the *adivasi* has always been constructed as 'lazy', 'drunkard', 'simpleton', 'backward' and 'primitive' (Sundar 1997). *Adivasi* men and women who did not follow social practices, as laid out by the dominant order, came to be constructed as the 'other', to be included in nation-building, but marked out as separate and inferior. *Adivasi* women, in particular, were further constructed as 'promiscuous', 'immoral' and sexually available, leading to no public rage in incidents of rape, brutalisation or murder (Bhattacharya 2017).

The Subject of Rape: Re-presenting Shame and Honour

How do the State and its apparatuses view raped women? Who or what makes for a good victim? What are the role of pain, shame and honour in understanding the subjectivities of women who resist rape and seek justice? How, as feminists, are we to understand the subject of rape? In context of social norms that interpellate a woman's body as representative of her family/community/nation, the coordinates of shame and honour function powerfully to constitute subjectivities of women, particularly the raped-rapeable woman. The notion of a body that is rapeable is not just a biologically determined notion, but one that is culturally constructed and socially produced through intersecting identities—which woman is more rapeable than another? The corollary question is which woman is a 'deserving' victim of rape? Or who deserves justice in the legal realm for being violated? The woman's ability to conform to norms, values and traditions that are not just gendered, but also specific to caste, class, community, and sexuality makes her less rapeable or more deserving of rape than others. Tied to family/community/national honour, rape is not just violence inflicted on a female body to terrorise and to denigrate, but an act, by its very sexual nature, specifically inflicted to violate and to dishonour, to shame and to silence. Thus rape is often referred to as '*izzat lootna*' (to dishonour) and not '*balaatkar*' (rape). This, as feminists have pointed out, is an indication of the discourse of shame that constitutes subjectivities of women, who have been sexually assaulted/ raped (Viswanath 1997; 323).

The dominant imagery of the raped woman is one of a victim, numbed into silence, passive, weak, and helpless, and in need of paternalistic protection and benevolence. Her pain and humiliation stems not just from the act of violation, but also from guilt and helplessness of losing

⁶Also co-authors of Batool et al 2016

honour, of betraying the family/community/ nation by *allowing* rape. Both guilt and shame produces subject. Experiencing pain, guilt, and shame are not just effects of being raped, but constitutive of the raped woman's subjectivity. Shame, as Sara Ahmed, tells us is an intense feeling. 'In shame the subject's movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself. In shame the subject may have nowhere to turn' (Ahmed 2004; 106). The feeling of shame emerges when one is exposed, when one has already accepted one's action/demeanour/words as that which does not fit into the norm, when one perceives one's self in the framework of lack. Shame is when one agrees to one's own humiliation. The shame and humiliation of being raped is associated with guilt—a guilt that one has not followed the gendered script of normative existence. This acceptance of being responsible for the act of violation constitutes subjects that do not fight for 'self-respect' but accept it as their 'fate'. The acceptance of such events as 'fate' can also be an attempt to a partial replenishment of dignity. Judith Butler argues that the subject is a 'belated metalepsis', a 'subject effect', it comes into being and is constituted by various discourses (Butler 1997; 50). Emotions, such as shame, for instance, interpellate subjects by drawing on social norms, histories, cultures and memories to constitute a woman who is compelled to accept herself as an inferior, abject being.⁷ Shame governs bodies, and immobilises them as weak, fragile and in need of protection. The shame and stigma experienced by a raped woman works against a subject's notion of the self; it constitutes the subject as docile, as fearful, and bereft of joy, robbed of self-esteem and pride.

It is in this framework that I would like to locate Soni Sori's articulation and enunciation of her custodial rape/sexual assault and her re-entering the political realm. I focus on Soni's narratives of her struggles, her modes of healing, her defiance and resistance to social norms, rather than dwell on the actual event of sexual violence in custody. Soni's narration of life, post-rape is one of strategies of survival, of building solidarities, and forging collectivities rather than a subjectivity centered on the event of rape that privileges chastity, modesty, and its defense. Embracing the identity of a raped woman that does not draw from the discourse on chastity, shame and dis/honour powerfully displaces dominant perceptions and seizes a more nuanced enunciation of sexual violence, devoid of patriarchal cultures and norms. When I asked Soni, the meaning of sexual violence and violations in context of the ongoing movement against land acquisition, and the role it plays in breaking the movement, she says,

Raping women is a very common ploy used to punish women who will not cooperate with them or do as they say—confess to being a Naxalite and surrender. They feel that after facing sexual violence and rape, women overwhelmed with shame and loss of honour will commit suicide. Or when the next time they raid a village, the women will hide in the jungles, and can be easily framed as Naxalites.

The articulation of sexual violation not as a loss of honour, but that of political injury, of being targeted as an enemy, rather than a 'deserving victim' is to politicise the wound rather than to fetishise it. To locate rape and sexual violation within the larger framework of land acquisition, impunity of security forces, and questions of social justice located within a Brahminical-patriarchal society drains the injury of its affective burden that draws on constructed notions of honour and

⁷Shame constitutes the subject's relation to itself, a sense of self. The experience of shame and sociality of the experience of shame constitutes a sense of apartness that manifests at a moment of exposure. In shame feelings of 'badness' is attributed to oneself. Ahmed 2004; 104-106

shame, while simultaneously foregrounding the sexual nature of the violence. Wendy Brown argues that under certain political frameworks, ‘injury’ itself becomes essential to the identity of the oppressed. The politicisation and mobilisation around this ‘injury’, what she calls ‘wounded attachments’, ensures being constituted by it, successfully foreclosing possibilities (Brown 1995). The feminist task then would be to understand and analyse how pain enters politics without fetishising it. Sexual violence must be brought into the political realm, devoid or drained of its normative affect of shame and dishonour. It must break with the past. It must be remembered differently.

Politicising Affect: Moving from Shame to a Politics of Pain

Emotions are important for politics, as emotions tell us how power shapes the surface of bodies, as well as the world around us. How does one think of politics emotively? How do emotions act in ways that facilitate relationships between people that are based on a similar injury and a sense of violation? Rape for its victims, is supposed to be an extinction of subjectivities, either through death or silence. Then how does one formulate a politics of pain based on sexual violence-violations? How can one think of pain as a basis for collective politics without ontologising it? The emphasis on the similarity of the experience, and the collaborative attempt to overcome pain is a way of healing, of empowerment. When I asked Soni, how she coped with her experiences and memories of violence-violations, and how she turned her private pain into a larger struggle for justice, she narrates:

After I went to jail, I felt ashamed, I wanted to die. I used to think that I should die...how would I face the world? After everything that has happened to me, how should I live ...? They were other women inmates, who were accused of Naxalism, and sexually tortured in custody. When I would cry and contemplate suicide, two girls approached me, and asked me what happened? I said, I do not want to live, I cannot live with my humiliation, cannot face society. I could not even think of telling the truth to my husband, as he would detest me. They told me of their experience, they opened their clothes, and showed me their breasts –their nipples were cut off, their breast mutilated. They asked me, what will happen to us? Who will listen to us? Who will fight for us? You are a teacher, you are educated, and you can fight. If you give in to despair, what will happen? I kept thinking that I should do something. I should fight back. I started writing letters to people outside the prison.

If the feeling of shame is an isolated, lonely experience, rather than one of collective binding, a politics based on hurt feelings works against this internalisation. Moving away from humiliation to seeking justice, means a movement from pain to non-pain, stimulated and brought alive by a sense of responsibility, and empathy with the collective. Rajan argues that to conceptualise pain as a passive state rather than dynamic, as in need of assistance rather than one who acts, falls into the trap of racial and colonial subjectivities that represents the ‘other’ in need of superior ‘intervention’. Thus to speak of agency and a ‘subject of/in pain’ one must invoke movements. She writes ‘pain is the very condition of a move towards non-pain’ (Rajan 1993; 35). However, pain is slippery terrain as it can (re)produce the normative feminine subject. Rajan cautions us that pain can become a yardstick of ideal femininity. The ability to transcend pain, for

instance, labour pain in child birth, is a signifier of ideal femininity (ibid). Similarly, I argue that a woman who internalises the pain of sexual violence, and remains in silence or embraces death is valourised as the normative victim of rape. It is this notion of the ‘victim’ (in need of sympathy and rehabilitation) that salvages a fallen (read: raped) woman. In this context, I argue that the movement from shame to pain can be seen as a feminist response to sexual violence. If shame means a curling in, a movement away from the world, away from the self, a movement inward, a politics based on shared experience of pain would imply a moving outward. The affective politics of pain that constitute defiance, a speaking out against power, a form of politics informed by emotional response to injustices is a re-orientation to the ways one lives in the world, how one inhabits norms, as well as contest it. Post-structuralist feminists have theorised the body not as a pre-given, raw matter that is civilised and moulded, but as a lived body, in its specific sexual and cultural differences, constituted by inter-locking systems of meanings, significations, and representations (Grosz 1994; Bordo 1995; Heinamaa 1996; Gatens 1996). To understand women’s perceptions of sexual violence would imply, taking into account women’s knowledge of her violations, and the way she lives her body. The body is neither a passive nor inert, but the condition and context through which she makes sense of the world around her. It is through the body, the subject’s relation with the collective is defined and constituted.

Soni’s narration of her experiences of interacting with other women falsely accused of Naxalism, and equally tortured, mutilated and raped in custody, her identifying and empathising with their experiences, and shared feelings of pain (re)animates the relation between the subject and the collective. Emotions, mediate how we live, and how we know the world. Soni, further narrates:

People wrote me letters, and I got the courage to fight back. I realised that I have to do away with shame. I started talking. My husband reproached me. He said ‘why are you talking about sexual violence. People are mocking me, teasing me, there is tremendous social pressure. You can talk of other kinds of violence, but not sexual violence’... I told him to give me a divorce, because I will not stop fighting. What has happened to me has not happened to him. He does not understand my pain. He is only thinking of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame), and I do not believe in either of them anymore.

Soni’s insistence that silence would not protect her, and her repudiation of hegemonic ideals of shame and honour citing pain, is an interesting one. Her insistence on pain as the experience of sexual violence/violation, and not shame and loss of honour questions the very construction of rape as the ultimate tool to annihilate women’s subjectivity. How does one locate Soni’s agency, articulated in her movement, from a subject of shame to a subject in pain? Soni Soni’s defiance of the trope of the ‘monolithic Third World woman’ stems from three actions: a) she is not the passive, dependent victim of rape seeking rehabilitation; b) she breaks her silence and politicises her wound to re-emerge in the field of politics; c) she moves from her personal isolating experience of pain to a collective based a contingent politics of hurt feelings. Soni disrupts and contests the discursive hegemonic construction of raped-violated victim-woman. She displaces the dominant paradigm of rape, and its narrative of the aftermath—the violator-aggressor-male body and its binary opposite, the passive-victim-female body—to articulate how

building bridges and establishing relations with women going through similar experiences was/is central to her strength and empowerment. She narrates:

That is when I think my personal experience does not weigh me down. It helps me to communicate with other women, going through similar experiences to mobilise to come together as a collective. My case is pending in the Supreme Court, and they are just giving me hearing dates, and nothing happens. It will go on even when I die. I have stopped thinking of it. I do not want to look at this whole issue through the eyes of legal justice and courts; whatever will happen there will happen. I rather seek justice, by mobilising women going through similar experiences and fighting back. The battle is bigger than a court battle, and I will gain victory here today.

Women's experiences of violence, violations, injuries and discriminations have been crucial to feminist politics. Soni chooses to speak and heal, not just through justice in the realm of legality, but by establishing relations with women undergoing similar pain. Her healing, lies in bridging the gap between her individual experiences of pain to a larger collective, contingently brought together based on politics of affect. The movement from the personal to the public realm transforms the pain. Ahmed argues, that to avoid making pain as an automatic foundation of feminist politics, and yet retaining its affective charge, requires movements—a will to act on pain, to politicise it (Ahmed 2004). The emphasis on pain as a response to sexual violence, a transformation of pain into embodied knowledge, pain defined not in relation to the past, but as a way of theorising transformational politics moves us outwards, into the world, to offer a different reading of what hurts, what causes us pain.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have argued for a strategic move in post-rape narratives that center pain, rather than shame and dishonour as the affective burden of sexual violence and violations. I do acknowledge that pain makes tricky grounds for theorising resistances, as pain can be signified within certain pre-determined codes. While on the one hand, many feminist scholars have argued for the failure of language in representing pain accruing from the feminine experience of violation, on the other hand, the reduction and objectification of women's pain in search of 'truth' shapes and defines women's subjectivity, legitimises her claim to 'victimhood' and facilitates rehabilitation, similar to Brown's theorisation of fetishisation of the wound. In this essay, I have moved beyond this binary of unrepresentability of pain, and fetishisation of wound, to argue for a politics of pain that animates the relation between the subject and the collective.

Taking Soni's post-rape narrative I have sought to understand, how one can politicise pain and acknowledge hurt, without lapsing into reified feminine victimhood. To speak up is one, but to continuously negotiate social norms that try to extinguish one's subjectivity through shame, to be able to collectivise using a language of pain that politicises the wound, and yet, does not fetishise it, and to be able to broaden one's struggles to question the violence embedded in the social order is remarkable in its feminist overtones. Soni, though vocal of the sexual trauma inflicted on her, is able to link her personal suffering with the larger collective suffering of her community, and the political struggle over land loss. This tying together of a politics of pain, with

bodily harm and psychic trauma, as well as the trauma of the collective, is for me a feminist language of resistance par excellence. One, that did not isolate and fetishise sexual violence, over all other forms and structures of violence, but placed it within the spectrum of violence that poor, lower-caste, tribal, working-class women face every day.

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