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## **Introduction: South Asian Feminisms and Youth Activism: focus on India and Pakistan**

By Nilanjana Paul<sup>1</sup>, Namita Goswami,  
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### **Introduction**

These are turbulent times for the many countries that form the Global South. South Asian nation-states are no exception; the last half century has ushered in liberalization of economies, forced structural adjustments, climate chaos, criminalization of indigenous and lower caste populations, and rapid technological changes. All these forces have resulted in massive upheavals often manifested in political, economic, and social crises. Experts observe that in times of instability, the most marginalized groups, already the target of social violence, are disproportionately subjected to enormous stress, anxiety, and insecurity. In South Asia, women, as one such group that faces multiple intersectional oppressions depending on class, caste, religious locations, etc. have been active participants on the frontlines of struggles for social justice and equity. In the new era of hardened nationalism and militarism, they have also been the targets of violence and brutality. Challenging and complicating the national security analytic that drives most area studies approaches to South Asian knowledge production, this special issue centers transnational feminist work that can help us read various social justice movements unfolding across South Asia through a “queer optic”<sup>3</sup> that aims to decolonize the normative narratives of nation, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion, among others. In being alert to the complex shifts in our understandings of these lived embodiments of sexed categories, we have included interventions by women from varying backgrounds and selected essays reflecting women’s many lived realities: as mothers, daughters, wives, lovers, and activists across different backgrounds, as they take on the acute challenges of forging coalitional alliances to assert agency in public and private spaces.

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<sup>3</sup> We borrow this term from Gayatri Gopinath’s book, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2020.

As a result of our methodological imperative of “queer optics” that decolonize normative narratives, we foreground how local, small-scale public pedagogies not only reverberate far beyond their regional inflections but rupture entrenched oppositions between the local (the non-west) and the global (the west). If postcolonial critique excavates the historicity of civilizing missions deemed necessary for progress and development, then the queer optics proffered in this volume suggest that the analytic horizons assumed as always already tangential to dominant forms of knowledge production may in fact convey and uphold precisely those governing circuits of exchange that must be sundered. It is this complicity, continuity, and mutual implication that moves us away from conflating privileged material practices of self-perpetuation and self-elaboration with effective—and affective- rebellion towards an analytic horizon wherein we map our perilous, fleeting, and cacophonous quotidian realities as disclosures of a language of kinship, coalition-building, and liberation.

The essays in this collection thus reflect the many ways in which women are not just victims of state (and familial) apparatuses of power across South Asia but have also organized and fought back against heteropatriarchal class and caste oppressions, while supporting their communities against the precarity of our neoliberal times. The Humanities and Social Science methodological approaches that frame the essays that follow, represent interdisciplinary mappings of women’s rights broadly construed, as these intersect with environmental and ecological interventions, land rights, LGBTQI+ identities and concerns, as well as hitherto unforeseen regressive trends regarding the mobilization/weaponization of religion and masculinist nationalisms in a neoliberal world order. As our edited collection demonstrates, our contemporary moment connects colonial and postcolonial realities in South Asia, showing how these historical eras are deeply intertwined and co-implicated in the resultant inequities spawned by neoliberal globalization, reflecting what the late Nawal el Saadawi dubbed, the patriarchal class system.

### **Section 1: Historical Groundings**

Historically, the construction of “veiled” and “enslaved” South Asian women has fired the imagination of colonial rulers; they condemned Indian religions as well as customs regarding women and focused on “civilizing” the Indian population. However, India has always had a rich tradition of indigenous feminist struggles that gained momentum with Indian independence movements. Concurrently, by the middle to the late nineteenth century, missionaries and British feminists understood the exploitative nature of British colonial exploitation and allied with Indian women’s aspirations for equity, with the former committed to the education and rights of all Indian women (Forbes, 1996 & Jayawardena, 1996). In that context, the authors in the first section examine a wide range of topics including how missionary education influenced Indian women’s fight for their rights by both challenging colonial rule as well as patriarchal customs. Women themselves came forward to articulate their ideas in terms of education, communicated their right to work outside homes and local communities, and formed organizations that addressed their needs. Despite obstacles, the struggle for women’s rights continued after independence in 1947 and was extended beyond domestic and employment rights. For example, women participated in grassroot level environmental protests like the Chipko movement and developed new frameworks to think about sustainable communities (Jain, 1984). Overall, these

essays provide an overview of the history of the various strands of women's coalitional struggles from pre-independence to modern India.

**Nilanjana Paul** tussles with the complexities of the roles that Christian nuns played in both helping empower women in the public sphere and representing an imperial power whose main aim was exploiting a colonized country. Just like many western missionaries, British women came to the sub-continent often with the intent of “emancipating” the local population, especially women. The Loreto nuns, however, were an exception in that they also challenged the traditional church hierarchy and became allies to Indian women in their quest for advancement. While the nuns set up convents to educate children from wealthy European families, they also built schools and colleges where Indian students of diverse backgrounds enrolled. Throughout this endeavor, the nuns' efforts were opposed by the upper echelons of the church hierarchy. The educational spaces offered by the Loreto nuns provided an opportunity for women to mingle and educate each other in their many differences. In their later years in India, the nuns were instrumental in opening institutions of higher education. Through their institutions, the nuns remained committed to both social justice and women's emancipation. For over more than a century, educational institutions run by Loreto nuns helped empower women through forging alliances across class, caste, and religious lines.

**Shoba Rajgopal** critiques the genealogical primacy granted to western feminists by using the occasion of the centenary celebration of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in the United States (2020) to affirm a first wave feminist legacy in India that predates western feminist intellectual landmarks such as Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), or Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1791). Tarabai Shinde, Lakshmi N. Menon, Dakshayini Velayudhan, Begum Aizaz Rasul Madam Bhikaji Cama, Sarojini Naidu, among others, created a radical and intersectional revolutionary feminism that not only included the battle against British colonialism and Christian proselytization in its activism but also represented diversity of caste, class, religion, region, and politics. Rajgopal details how India's first wave feminists advocated for property rights, education, secularism, social welfare, and suffrage and participated in the writing of India's constitution. Rajgopal's return to this feminist archive undermines the very basis of the “civilizing mission”—the ostensible liberation of native women from the barbaric violence perpetrated by native men.

**Gowri Parameswaran** traces the post-independence history of ecological movements led by women in India. She highlights the rich diversity of backgrounds and frameworks that these grassroots movements adopted. Many of the early efforts were not to protect the environment primarily but were rooted in the material needs of the women who were doing the organizing. The Chipko movement, for instance, was an attempt to safeguard the forests that were under threat due to mining. The grassroots organizers had to confront Indian state power head on, and they did through their intimate connections to family and community. When ecofeminism as a guiding paradigm was adopted by pioneers like Vandana Shiva, India had already had a half century of ecological movements led by women. With the increasing liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, there was a pervasive assumption that economic development requires a sacrifice of ecological goals. Today, a new generation of ecofeminists challenge that notion by pointing to the direct impact that ecological destruction has had on the health and the wellbeing of individuals and communities. They call for Eco socialism,

an environmentalism of the poor centering an equitable redistribution of resources as the only path to stop ecological destruction.

## **Section 2: Violence and Precarity Through Queer Optics**

Our examination of South Asia through a queer optic does not decolonize normative narratives through reconstituting India and Pakistan as Queer Nations, a figuration that reinforces western narratives of modernity and consumer-based neoliberal notions of citizenship. Given the absolute triumph of capital, the disarming of labour power, and the conflation of moneyed interests with democratic norms, reimagining agency requires “spatial, temporal, and corporeal convergences, implosions, and rearrangements” (Puar, “Assemblages” 121). As political and social infrastructures are inexorably appropriated for profit maximization and institutional self-preservation, queerness does not simply manifest an identitarian analytic or rallying cry. Rather, a queer optic discerns and maps those extremely hard-won relationalities that subvert teleological trajectories of queerness. In this rendition, the politics of visibility that “outs” the hitherto latent or covert in fact presuppose precisely what must be painstakingly forged in the transnational annexation of “life” itself: those fragile and momentary affinities that form the very substance of a coalitional politics.

Valorizations of the vanguard, revolutionary, or transparent, therefore, often confuse the (re)fashioning of a patent or trademark with the actual (often maddeningly glacial) struggle for change. The authors in this section, therefore, primarily, challenge how understating and thereby discounting the diversity, dissonances, multiplicities, and multifariousness of the lives that are being actively erased and/or reified ironically depoliticizes queerness and results in stagnant liberatory practices stuck in an endless dialectic of exclusion vs. inclusion that leaves the hegemonic place of this encounter unmarked. Contra such stale forms of theory and activism, the queer optics adopted by the authors in this section not only attempt to shift regulatory frames of disciplining and normalization that congeal queerness as a diagnosis and/or corrective of technologies of power, but also yield the historicity that unproblematically posit public self-expression as civil disobedience.

**Anhiti Patnaik** focuses on digital feminisms by formulating a cripqueer notion of futurity that subverts capitalist fetishization of efficiency, productivity, and expansion, which disproportionately affected women during the lockdowns precipitated by COVID-19 in India. These lockdowns manifest a biopolitics that results in techno precarity, a population of temporary workers denied the most basic means of survival. Statist biometric surveillance and patriarchal nationalism exacerbated already chronic deprivations to further expose these populations to death and decrepitude. Patnaik suggests that algorithmic scales of efficiency, productivity, and expansion, manifest, for example, in the number of shares and likes one receives, create forms of cultural and socioeconomic capital that renders temporary workers permanently disabled. She demonstrates how cripqueer resistance to exploitation and invisibility allows us to determine the mutual imbrication of gender, class, caste, sexuality, and ability in producing pliant, hyper-objectified labour.

**Satnauka Banerjee**'s queer optics attempt a synthesis of transnational digital feminism through capturing the emerging hashtag movements and their real-life reverberations. Along with providing a global overview of recent feminist online campaigns, she focuses on Indian feminist

activist discourse in historical and contemporary context, a queering of neoliberal forms of subjectivity and agency that explicitly addresses rural women. Using a qualitative approach, she explores online spaces, such as social media and webpages, that initiate discourses and conversations about various women's issues to build a transnational network that can augment activism from various social groups seeking justice. She underscores that the existing digital divide often holds non-urban women back from asserting their rights and voices and acts as a significant factor in marginalizing women in terms of class, caste, and sexuality. Consequently, she calls for making the transnational feminist activism in online spaces more diverse, inclusive, decentralised, and democratic, aiming at collective emancipation.

Taking Gayatri Spivak's well-known use of literature as facilitating an "uncoercive rearrangement of desires," **Aakanksha Singh's** reflections venture beyond conventional understandings of queerness to proffer disparate queer subjectivities. Although Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* is credited as the catalyst for Pride movements against neoliberal Hindu fundamentalism, Singh enjoins the synonymy of queerness with visibility. Even as queer publics must necessarily reconstitute civil society through progressive legislation, nonheteronormative desires nonetheless find expression only in making themselves visible. Contesting specular logics that equate liberation with being "out," Singh suggests that demanding an appreciable exteriority from queer subjects, particularly through social media, parades, protests, etc., reduces queerness to flamboyant performativity. Such an identity's shallowness restricts the heterogenous force of queer subjectivities that make their presence felt precisely through their quiet resistance.

**Namita Goswami** also takes Gayatri Spivak as her point of departure by reading Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Thanda Gosht" (1950), through Spivak's concept of "originary queerness." Manto's synecdoche ("cold meat") for an unnamed, abducted, and raped female corpse captures the brutality visited upon women's bodies during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Instead of focusing on the story's subaltern victim, however, Goswami argues that "Thanda Gosht's" female protagonist, Kulwant Kaur, by way of her repeated question about this subaltern—who she *is*, (re)figures reproductive heteronormativity as a process of unknowing. Her lover Ishar Singh's peculiar affective idiom when describing his necrophilic encounter by way of response in fact docket the teleological futurity of Nation itself as (visiting) "burre ki ma ka ghar" (बुरे की माँ के घर; the house of Bad's mother).

### **Section 3: Women, Labor, Activism**

Women organizing together and adapting a collective outlook towards empowering their everyday lives and livelihoods is the theme of this section. The papers highlight the agency of women as well as their collective participation in challenging mainstream discourses around professions such as agriculture and pastoralism, which are considered masculinist. The recently concluded farmers protest opposing the farm laws of 2020 of India is taken as a reference point by Chakrabarti in her paper to reflect on the fascist, masculinist tendencies of the state in favor of the corporatization of Indian agriculture. These hegemonic suppressions have been successfully challenged through collective action from the women farmers across various intersectional identities. At the same time, these collective protests by women farmers have also highlighted

the strong and undeniable presence of female farmers in an otherwise male dominant sector. In the same spirit, Malhotra et.al., foreground collective community-based actions and divisions of labor taken up by the Gaddi pastoralist women. Their observations offer an alternative worldview on women's role and their collective exercise of agency in ensuring the continuity of pastoral livelihoods. These two papers revisit mainstream narratives around farming and pastoralism and document the presence of alternative forms of representations by women that most often get sidelined.

**Paromita Chakrabarti** presents a critical outlook on neoliberal forms of governance and the hegemonic oppression of dissent. Focusing on the large-scale participation of women in the farmers protest across multiple caste, class, occupational, and religious divides, she asserts that the composition and dynamics of collective resistance in contemporary Indian democratic society have become symbols of solidarity and intersectional dissent. The farmer's protest has brought to the fore women's role in mass mobilisations, especially in the context of the corporatization of agri-businesses. Women farmers have successfully challenged this masculinist control of the state, as well as the conventional notions of male dominance in the farming sector, through their participation in big numbers at the Delhi borders. Chakrabarti concludes that women's participation in this protest has tremendous significance for the larger women's movement for justice, equality, and rights and can pose a challenge to the return of the "Strong State" because women's collective expression of agency in face of excessive fascism might rekindle democratic spirits.

In **Aayushi Malhotra, Sailaja Nandigama and Kumar Sankar Bhattacharya's** exploration of women's role in pastoral communities, the authors peel back commonly held perceptions about pastoral work being a masculine venture. Through a survey of literature and using specific cases, the authors establish that women play a significant role in the day to day economic and social activities related to a pastoral livelihood. Given the dearth of studies in this field, the authors use a gender framework to make women's agency evident—in their roles as herder, trader, knowledge bearer, and healer. With the men in the community often being away with the herd, women have the space to exert their influence within their social context. Though pastoral work is organized in a patriarchal manner, women use their situated knowledge to bring about positive change that benefits their families and communities. In times of precarity, women in these communities organize across caste and religious lines and engage in political activism. At a time when the Indian government is on a mission to "sedenterize" migratory communities, women's voices in the community are especially important to ensure justice.

#### **Section 4: Challenging National/Religious Myths through Literature, Film, Music, Theatre**

Protest movements have always integrated indigenous cultural forms in their expression and South Asia is no exception. In recent years, as religious fanaticism and militant heteropatriarchal nationalism have risen in the region, communities targeted by violence have expressed their outrage and garnered public support by utilizing traditional art and mythological narratives. Women's rights activists have engaged in reinterpreting age-old stories from new perspectives, forcing the public to engage with tough issues seriously. At the same time, art forms relegated to the margins of society have been reinvigorated and centered by a new generation of artists who problematize protest itself; they raise important questions around issues

of caste oppression and religion through the lens of folk art. The essays in this section challenge what we understand as “old” and “new” by either appropriating art forms available only to the beneficiaries of neoliberalism or by demystifying age-old myths and ancient hatreds as represented in various mediums.

**Shruti Chakrabarty** tackles feminist revisionary mythmaking through one of India’s most overdetermined female figures, Sita in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. As the epitome of female virtue, Sita’s presence in the epic paradoxically serves to reinforce her absence. Chakrabarty contends that Samhita Arni’s graphic narrative *Sita’s Ramayana*, complemented by *patachitra* or scroll painting by Moyna Chitrakar, a female artist from rural West Bengal, undermines androcentric interpretations of the epic. Arni and Chitrakar challenge Brahmanical orthodoxy through folk art forms reminiscent of a sixteenth century retelling called *Chandrabati Ramayan* by Chandrabati, the first women poet of Bengal. These ballads, sung by rural women of Bengal and Bangladesh, upend Ram’s canonical deification and demystify the storied grandeur of the battle between Ayodhya and Lanka by rendering them secondary to Sita’s suffering and resilience. As such, Sita represents the quotidian travails of common women rather than idealized wifehood.

**Pramila Venkateswaran** engages with the performances of rap, *gaana*, and street theater (*koothu*) in Tamil Nadu by young Dalit men and women and their effort to change the narrative of caste oppression. Youth activists perform protest songs in the genre of rap and song, using elements of slam poetry and rap from African American artists and blend them with local musical innovations. Through youth rappers, such as Arivu and Isaivani’s performances, Venkateswaran examines the reasons for their popularity and how they reflect on caste and gender injustices both current and historical. Lastly, these performances demonstrate the integration of cultural expressions as a medium of protest and throws a spotlight on Dalit feminist activism and the future of Dalit people

**Shreerexha Pillai Subramanian** features the entrenched cinematic responses in India to social justice movements, touching upon the lives of an inter-faith couple and their children. She points to director N. Padmakumar’s lack of an explicit gaze on a Hindu-led political hegemony, and the excesses of violence performed by the nation-state and its Hindutva brigade against its minoritized “Muslim” and othered subjects. She highlights the film’s usage of a black and white binary that effortlessly presents the image of a nation of teeming diversity and its border-crossing love from a child’s point of view while also contextualizing the film within a neoliberal economic hegemonic system that works in tandem with a regressive Hindutva agenda.

### Section 5: Pakistani Feminisms in Neoliberal Contexts

In our penultimate section, **Naila Sahar**, **Afiya Sheherbano Zia**, and **Fawzia Afzal-Khan's** essays provide a roadmap of some key issues that are germane to artistic, activist as well as scholarly concerns within the realm of Pakistani and Pakistani-diasporic feminist theory and praxis. Given the heavily India-centric focus of this issue--a result not by design but default, due to India’s role as the South Asian regional hegemonic power-- it is unsurprising that most of our submissions reflected this regional imbalance of voices. We therefore felt it appropriate to conclude with a focus on Pakistani feminists and feminisms that are situated in, and reflective of, local and global contexts, and which have now had a long history of dealing with the impact of

various fundamentalisms on women's and minorities' rights. The required negotiation between the scylla and charbydis of Islamism vs Islamophobia places Pakistani feminist movement at the center of issues engulfing South Asia currently. This is particularly the case now with India's government promoting a Hindutva brand of nationalism, that has profoundly serious implications for minoritized and women's rights within India, similar to what unfolded across the border in neighboring Pakistan under the extremist Islamist policies put in place by the late General Zia ul Haq during the 1980s. To date, state policies and laws enacted in the name of religion in Pakistan, continue to exercise detrimental ramifications on the country's ideology and consequently, on its citizens' lives and rights. India, as the region's dominant power, with a far greater population than any of its other South Asian neighbors including Pakistan, has much to learn from the unraveling of the latter, if it is to avoid a similar fate which could have far more regressive repercussions not just for India but the entire subcontinent, especially on women, religious minorities, and LGBTQ identified populations spanning the region.

**Naila Sahar's** essay alerts us to some of these regressive consequences faced by two Pakistani women, one an activist and the other an artist, who shot (pun unintended!) to worldwide fame when the former, a young teenager named Malala Yousafzai was shot by the Taliban but survived and went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her advocacy of girls' education, and the latter, a female filmmaker named Sharmeen Obeid-Chinoy, made a documentary film about the crime of acid-throwing on women, that won her an Oscar for best documentary feature. Sahar's exploration of the g/local contexts of nationalism, local patriarchy, and western liberal feminisms in service to imperialist hegemonic agendas, which shape the representational frameworks within which these cultural workers' scripts circulate and gain currency, points to the double-bind in which such discourses are caught, thereby limiting the reception of its protagonists to an either/or dichotomy: national s/heroes, or native informant apologists for western imperialist feminist agendas.

**Afiya Shehrbano Zia's** examination of the fraught field of Pakistani feminist activism notes both the importance, yet also the inefficacy, of a cultural politics disarticulated with the political goals of (secular) feminist-identified policy platforms. Thus, she argues that, whilst Pakistan's annual Aurat March (Women's March) demonstrations have seen thousands of women (and their male allies) take to the streets in major cities since 2018 to protest a g/local patriarchal culture of sexual harassment (tied to bodily shame, a notion that pietist Islamic discourses, like most patriarchies, endorse), and that such interventions do indeed signify "a milestone in the culture of feminist protest," the potential power of such protests to enhance rights-based activism has been compromised. One reason for this weakness is that the organizers of Aurat March, comprised of younger millennials, failed to heed advice from senior activists of the Pakistani feminist movement, "to connect protest marches on sexual freedoms and violence with women's bodily, health, and labour rights." In lieu of chalking out a "stable ideological vision" that could help reform state institutions and governmental policies on women's rights by "developing strategic engagement with political parties and laws," this younger generation of feminist activists has run afoul of the religious establishment and conservative politicians; even some older-generation liberal progressives and feminists were made uncomfortable by the Aurat Marchers' use of sexually explicit and provocative slogans deemed inappropriate/culturally insensitive in a Muslim society. Because of their decontextualized approach to sexual politics in

Pakistan, that opens itself up to charges of “foreign influences” in the absence of broad-based coalitional work that could link sexual politics to longstanding feminist rights-based demands for access to health, education, employment and fair wages, the net effect of the Aurat March phenomenon has been Pakistani postmodern feminism’s performative failure to engage the neoliberal state in reverting to a progressive, secular, rights-based model, and away from the pietist politics enabled by the man-military-mullah nexus.

**Fawzia Afzal-Khan's** essay is the broadest of the three in terms of both its transnational and its transdisciplinary purview. Several issues discussed in the other two Pakistan-focused essays are brought into a shared analytic space under a materialist rubric, establishing the need to link various discursive formations to economics as a precondition for decolonial feminist movements. Thus, concerns adumbrated by Sahar regarding the “double-bind” of discursive formations that feminist activist and artistic interventions within Pakistan’s body politic find themselves ensnared in, which are critiqued as an insufficient politics through Afiya Zia’s analysis of the culturalist limitations of Aurat March demonstrations across Pakistani cities, and which are issues germane to cultural and political activism, are linked to a broader transnational economic heuristic. Her intervention concludes the section (and the special issue), by elaborating affinities between the nexus of neoliberal/rentier capitalism, religious extremism, and patriarchy as coeval fundamentalist ideologies, which, when seen in g/locally interconnected ways, provide the tools for a properly materialist intersectional analysis of women’s and human rights.

It is our hope that this collection of essays exemplifies the heterogeneous praxes being employed by women from India and Pakistan as they bridge both discursive and rights-based conceptual terrain, thereby enabling us to (re)envision and (re)enact solidarities for progressive social change in South Asia and beyond. These intersectional feminisms offer alternative forms of historical temporization and spatialization and manifest the unpredictable ramifications of collective agency against the confluence of patriarchy, communalism, and capitalism.