



**SOAS**  
University of London

# LOOKING FOR THE INDIAN WOMAN'S IDENTITY: DISCREPANCIES AND POWER IMBALANCES ACROSS THEORY AND POPULAR CULTURE

THE SOAS JOURNAL OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Author: Monika Hirmer

Department/Centre: Department of Religions and Philosophies

Publication: The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research,  
Volume 9 (2015-16), Pages 7-23

Stable URL: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/id/eprint/24141>

Key words: Feminist discourses – Identity – India – Power – Second wave feminism – Third wave feminism

Licence: Published under the Creative Commons copyright licensing

# LOOKING FOR THE INDIAN WOMAN'S IDENTITY: DISCREPANCIES AND POWER IMBALANCES ACROSS THEORY AND POPULAR CULTURE

Monika Hirmer<sup>1</sup>  
183438@soas.ac.uk  
Department of Religions and Philosophies

## ABSTRACT

---

After providing a brief account of the evolution of the Indian feminist movement, I move on to analyse the development of the perception of Indian women, first through the lens of scholarly writings, and then through Indian films and TV series. Identifying distinct trends in the academic analyses of Indian women from the 1980s onwards, I collocate these writings within the larger framework of feminist discourses. The pervasive influence that scholars exert on the perceived identities of Indian women, shaping them in accordance with their own theoretical frameworks, becomes thus evident. Earlier studies, mainly adopting a structural paradigm and assuming the image of the Brahmanical woman as point of reference, allude to the dichotomy of 'woman as goddess/woman as whore', and can be associated with second-wave feminism; studies from the '90s onwards, endorsing an increasingly complex framework, have given voice to those women who do not conform to the Brahmanical value system, and have been correlated to third-wave feminism. While scholarly writings departed from the binary framework within which the image of Indian women is often caught, a similar shift cannot be distinctly observed in the film industry, which responds to the demands of the collective imagery. This poses queries about the extent to which academic discourses are representative of Indian women's identities or rather of the current Western zeitgeist, and about the power imbalances that are perpetuated by 'othering' Indian women through making them repeated objects of study.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to the V. P. Kanitkar Memorial Scholarship, through which her studies are generously funded.

## INTRODUCTION

---

Ever since women's social position became of interest to the elites during the colonial era, the perception of Indian women has undergone a substantial, albeit slow, evolution. From conforming to the ideal of womanhood promoted by a primarily Brahmanical-Victorian outlook, the image of Indian women has today become increasingly heterogeneous, allowing for the voices of women from different backgrounds to be heard—at least within academic literature.

By observing the evolution of scholarship on Indian women through time, it appears that it progressed in conjunction with the development of larger, essentially Western, feminist discourses. The mainly monolithic Brahmanical-Victorian image of the Indian woman, protagonist of academic writings from the '70s and '80s, was prominent when second-wave feminists promoted a universal ideal woman (very different from the Indian model, but equally unquestioned in her universality); then, as the feminist movement started to progress towards its third wave in the '80s and '90s, with a more comprehensive and multifaceted image of women, also Indian business-, fisher- and Dalit-women became protagonists of scholarly analyses. However, despite a shift in the perception of Indian women in academic literature towards an increasingly heterogeneous outlook, a similar trend is not always reflected in everyday social contexts, where women who do not conform to dominant models of chastity and purity, are still often repudiated.

After providing a brief outline of the major trends of feminism in India in the following section, in the third and fourth sections I will illustrate how the perception of the Indian woman developed within scholarly literature. In doing so, I will first examine the works of Susan Wadley (1977, 1980a), Margaret Egnor (1980) and Holly Reynolds (1980), presenting them as representative samples of second-wave feminism. Next, in the fourth part of the essay, I concentrate on the demise of the monolithic ideal Indian woman, and on what can be considered an expression of third-wave feminism within the Indian context. I present the increasingly composite image of Indian women through works such as those of Sarah Lamb (1997, 2000), Frédérique Apffel-Marglin (2008) and Sudhakar Rao (2007). In the fifth section, I will briefly reflect on the Indian woman as she is perceived in cinematic productions, rather than in academic literature.

The evolution from a uniform imagined identity of the Indian woman towards a heterogeneous one can be collocated within the larger shift that occurred across the social sciences and humanities, from a considerably rigid and dichotomous structuralist paradigm towards an increasingly fluid and complex postmodern approach. It appears that the changes in the manner in which Indian women have been depicted throughout time may be as much a result of the impact that prevailing theoretical frameworks exert on the representation of identities, as of an actual change in the identities of Indian women. Crucially, it has to be asked what power dynamics underlie, and are furthered by, the 'othering' of Indian women that occurs in making them repeated objects of study.

## THE ORIGINS OF FEMINISM IN INDIA

---

The Devī is a woman with a large *bindi* on her forehead, wearing a *saree* and fair in complexion. She is sexually passive, gentle and self sacrificing, monogamous,

looking upon the face of the only one man in her life, her husband, and she is the repository of the honour of the family.

Subhadra Channa 2007, 37

The above image of the Indian woman is diametrically opposed to what Channa (2007) terms a *dāsī*, a woman who has none of the *devī*'s qualities, and is instead tribal or from a low caste, working, sexually active, independent and dark. The first image is the portrait of the ideal woman, while the latter depicts a woman who is often considered to be disrespectful towards Indian tradition and deserving of punishment for her boldness. That the two opposite images represent extremes of a spectrum, which in fact contains an array of innumerable expressions of womanhood, is seldom recognised, and popular discourse around the Indian woman continues in great part to focus on these dichotomous poles.

The formulation of an ideal Indian womanhood gained momentum during the colonial era, when feminist ideas, which started to be heard in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became part of the vocabulary of a minority of literate elite Indian women. Along with the pure, chaste, homely Brahman women, influential men from the Indian elite and exponents of the nationalist movement also endorsed the cause for the affirmation of an Indian womanhood, deeply linking it with the development of a national identity. In a time when India was looking for an identity around which to shape her fight for freedom, it was possible to observe 'the construction of a particular kind of past that provided the context for a particular kind of womanhood' (Ghosal 2005, 796). As Uma Chakravarti observed, 'the past itself was a creation of the compulsions of the present and these compulsions determined which elements were highlighted and which receded from the conscious object of concern in historical and semi-historical writings' (quoted from Ghosal 2005, 796-797). Selectively, only texts from the 'Great Sanskrit Tradition' such as the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* were promoted as the bearers of a pure Indian tradition by the Indian elite and Western scholars alike, contributing to the emergence of a monolithic Indian identity that was in stark contrast with what was expressed in tribal myths or village folklore as well as in everyday practices.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the ideal Indian womanhood was one reflecting exclusively the value system of upper-castes and the Vedic concept of purity; along with those came the image of an extremely fragile woman, who had to be constantly protected by her male relatives, and who was to be preferably veiled or otherwise covered, in order to preserve her modesty.<sup>3</sup>

The link between a 'rediscovered' national Indian-ness and an 'indigenous' womanhood dissolved when the British assumed a position of sympathy towards the women of India: due to the fact that the nationalist public agenda lost a motive of opposition to the colonisers, the cause for women receded to the background. This would be the state of Indian feminism well into the first decades of Independence, due to a general belief that, with time, through Nehru's emphasis on egalitarianism, secularism and democracy, all social—thus also gender—adversities would be overcome.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See Channa 2007 for a more detailed overview.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard the passage from the *Manusmṛiti* '[i]n childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be left independent', invariably comes to mind (quoted from Bolich 2008, 281).

<sup>4</sup> See Sarbani Ghosal 2005 for an overview of trends in Indian feminism.

It was only in the 1970s that specifically women's issues became more prominent, as many political parties institutionalised women's wings, and indigenous movements led by women, such as the Chipko protest,<sup>5</sup> arose at the grassroots level.

## THE IMAGE OF THE INDIAN WOMAN IN ACADEMIC WRITING OF THE 1970S-'80S: THE IDEAL DEVĪ

---

The academic study of the Indian woman developed as an aspect of the wider growing interest in gender issues, which proliferated in the West from the 1970s onwards. Western scholars were fascinated by fierce, exotic goddesses such as Kālī and Durgā first, and by the more docile and benevolent characters of consort goddesses such as Lakṣmī, Sītā and Rādhā successively, before shifting their attention to Indian women.<sup>6</sup> However, despite concentrating on the *human* female, both, fierce and benevolent goddesses remained the implicit models against which anthropologists evaluated women. The contributors to *The Powers of Tamil Women* (1980), one of the most influential works on Indian women of that time, presented almost exclusively the image of the ideal Indian woman that was promoted by the elite, defined by her resemblance to chaste goddesses on the one side, and her opposition to independent, sexual goddesses, on the other.

While these works offer invaluable insights into various aspects of Indian women, which are in great part still applicable today, it appears that they are mainly confined within a Brahmanical outlook, neglecting a majority of Indian women who are not the wives of a *pandits*, nor spend a considerable amount of time in their homes, but are instead tanned from working in the fields, mingle with men, and may publicly display a self-willed character—in one word, the *dāsīs*, as per Channa's (2007) definition. Accounts that take into consideration almost exclusively the image of the *devī*, elevating it to represent the prototype of the Indian woman, cannot render a satisfactory picture of Indian women in general. However, when viewing these early studies in relation to the specific timeframe in which they were written, it becomes possible to shed some light on their partiality. Firstly, they can largely be collocated within the paradigm of second-wave feminism, which, initially appearing in Europe and America in the 1960s and '70s, tended to search for, and emphasise, a universal character of women, envisaging them as being equally burdened by, and unified in, the opposition to patriarchal systems across the world. Secondly, the dichotomous relationship between 'woman as goddess/woman as whore' that underlies many of these writings reflects the emphasis on opposites introduced by Lévi-Strauss' Structuralism (1963), and which constituted one of the dominant theoretical frameworks throughout the 1970s.

It is thus that Margaret Egnor (1980), Holly Reynolds (1980) and Kenneth David (1980) similarly identify as a prototype a woman who is either, on the one side, dangerous, inauspiciously powerful, single, hot and with an insatiable sexual appetite, or, on the other

---

<sup>5</sup> The Chipko (from *chipko*, 'hugging' in Hindi) movement is considered to be one of the first exemplars of ecofeminism in practice: in the 1970s, women in the Garhwal region hugged trees to protest against industrial deforestation and to protect the source of their livelihoods. Feminism and ecology, Vandana Shiva points out, are interconnected, as the worldview that generates environmental degradation is the same that promotes male domination (Shiva 1988).

<sup>6</sup> See Wadley 1980a.

side, tame, cool, married and auspicious—thus recreating in the human domain the binary opposition that Lawrence Babb (1975) had applied to the goddesses of the Indian pantheon.<sup>7</sup> What follows within the given framework is that, in order for the dangerous power of Indian women (or goddesses) to be transformed into fecund auspiciousness, women have to be cooled by the control and protection of husbands. Should they not yet be ripe for marriage, the inauspiciousness of women has to be controlled by their fathers, or, in the case of widows, by their sons.

The dangers and powers of women are not always consistent throughout their lifetime. As Reynolds (1980) and David (1980) observe, their powers increase during puberty and culminate with motherhood: in highly auspicious forms in the case of married mothers, and in distinctly inauspicious forms in the case of unmarried mothers. A married mother is considered to be the most powerfully auspicious woman and enjoys the highest social status that is attainable by women.

Conversely, the dangers of women are minimal before puberty and potentially destructive during their fertile age, if they are unmarried. Once women get married, men can safely control their latent threats. Accordingly, at menarche, severe social restrictions are imposed upon girls,<sup>8</sup> who are formally initiated through marriage-like rituals. These restrictions are at their most stringent up to the time that a girl is wed to a man. In the case of menopausal women, the dangers diminish, and so do the social restrictions.

As a widow, a woman again becomes highly inauspicious and dangerous, and has to be rendered sexually unattractive through the shaving of her head and the abandonment of all her jewellery. With the exception of widowhood, where women are to a great extent marginalised by society regardless of their age (and, thus, of their biological fecundity), it appears that the powers and dangers of women are intrinsically connected with their fertility, more specifically indicated by their menstruation.

The capacity to menstruate, in its 'controlled' or 'uncontrolled' presence or absence, is the most prominent phenomenon determining the social status of Indian women. While often labelled as simply unhygienic, Mary Douglas' elaborations in *Purity and Danger* (1966) suggest that the nature of menstruation, in its profoundest essence, is actually ambiguous; as such, not being liable to classification, and thus posing a threat of transgressing the boundaries that uphold social order, menstruation has to be either controlled or banished.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, it is the command over female *fertility* and *sexuality* that is prohibited to women.

The overall image which is meant to be conveyed is that of a woman whose natural condition is clearly inauspicious, or at least dangerous; this danger derives from the woman's potential control over her own body's fertility and sexuality. Only through union with a husband can this underlying threat be transformed into auspiciousness. The highly venerated and benign powers of married mothers are thus only *derivatives*: while power, or

---

<sup>7</sup> The focus of this paper is on women rather than on goddesses, therefore I cannot here expand on Babb's classification. For a critique of the same, see for example Stanley Kurtz (1992, 20-21).

<sup>8</sup> Restrictions range from tying their hair up, to wearing more constrictive clothes and, obviously, to limitations in their interactions with men, especially with those to whom they are not related.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of how the values of purity/impurity and auspiciousness/inauspiciousness interact see Apffel-Marglin's eminent ethnography *Wives of the God-King: Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (1985).

*śakti*, is internal to women, it is the connection with men, which determines whether this power is primarily auspicious or dangerous. Men, however, do not have such powers, nor can they appropriate them through marriage; they can only control them.<sup>10</sup>

The necessary connection between women and men in everyday life is directly correlated in the Indian philosophical domain with the concepts of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. *Prakṛti* represents nature, femininity, active force and undifferentiated matter; *puruṣa* is its counterpart, the inactive male aspect and differentiated spirit. As Wadley observes, '[t]he union of Spirit and Matter, code and noncode, inactive and active, leads to the creation of the world with all of its differentiated forms; no life exists without both, Matter and Spirit, *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*' (1977, 114). This philosophical union pervades much of Indian thought, and can be traced at most levels of gender relations. While Wadley states that in the Indian realm the seed of men is more important than the receptors (women), and much of the literature concentrates primarily on the domination of men over women, the *prakṛti-puruṣa* relation allows for at least three interpretations: a) the female and the male principle being equally important and deserving equal respect and veneration; b) the male principle being more important than the female principle and dominating the relationship; and c) the female principle being more valuable and deserving higher respect than the male principle.

Elaborating on these typologies of partnerships, Sheryl Daniel (1980) observes that the second model reflects an outspoken dominance of the husband over the wife, based on the man's assumed superiority: it is the man's control over the woman that assures the prosperity of the family, and it is the union in marriage to a man, which confers respectability to the life of a woman, as long as she worships him as her primary god. The third model, instead, while publicly presenting a power-dynamic similar to the second, conferring the husband an apparent authority over the wife, privately relies upon the wife's control of the husband: '[n]ot only is the woman...capable of managing her own *śakti*, but women must also manage the affairs of men especially as they effect the honour and prosperity of the family. Thus it is the duty of the mother and later the wife to restrain, reform and protect men from their uncontrolled propensities' (Daniel 1980, 72).<sup>11</sup>

Throughout most of the recounts in Wadley's collection (1980), a relationship dynamic emerges wherein men are dominant and women submissive. In particular, Egnor and Reynolds focus on the suffering of women as a direct consequence of their subordinate status, and on the seemingly contradictory *śakti* that derives thereof. Women, through their subordination, gain a power that is superior to that of the very men oppressing them: from the *śakti* that the ideal wife thus acquires, depend the prosperity of the family in general, and the life of the husband in particular. Thus women, through their *tapas* (self-sacrifice and

---

<sup>10</sup> The recent study by Joyce Flueckiger shows alternative ways in which men aim at experiencing and gaining access to *śakti* (2013).

<sup>11</sup> This case is illustrated by David (1980) in his recounts of Hindu Jaffna women, where he shows how they, despite being officially oppressed and subservient to men through a complex series of rituals, actually have tangible powers (as opposed to rather metaphysical forms of *śakti* described below), which they subtly deploy to influence daily events in their favour. Whether through participating in the system of production by imparting orders to labourers from their back verandas, through influencing crucial wedding alliances, or by asserting their inheritance rights, these women are far from the 'public image of feminine ignorance, subordination, modesty, and deference to males' (David 1980, 106).

austerity practices), become the repositories of the family's wellbeing and honour and, at the same time, become responsible for their misfortunes. As David states: 'To the Tamil, actions of suffering are not derogated as actions of the weak, but are perceived within a religious framework wherein suffering leads to powers (*śakti*)' (1980, 104). This is how Reynolds and Egnor explain the fact that it is women themselves who are the most ardent supporters of a tradition based upon their own suffering: '[w]omen need be subordinate to men, and such subordination endows women with a power that is superior in intensity, range, and effect than that which led to their subordination in the first place. Subordination, therefore, becomes not merely tolerable but providential. A subordinated woman, an auspicious woman, emerges as the most powerful female being, and, indeed, in certain circumstances, as a female being more powerful than men' (Reynolds 1980, 57). The image that emerges is that of a woman who is immersed in a circular nexus of causality, wherein suffering and power continuously reinforce each other: without oppression, *śakti* cannot unfold and, in turn, the power supports the oppression. The gender relation of type b) delineated above is thus brought to its utmost expression: *śakti* is no longer an innate part of women, as it manifests through self-sacrifice and submission to men. While the attitude of Tamil women of reinforcing the connubial relationship between power and suffering may seem dissonant to Western sensibilities, Egnor observes that 'these actions and ideas are both logical and natural within the Indian framework' (1980, 4).<sup>12</sup>

Throughout Wadley's collection, the authors seem to be chiefly concerned, on the one hand, with the apparently paradoxical link between *śakti* and oppression—mostly attributing it to a dichotomous conception of the Indian woman as either pious and tame or inauspicious and independent; and, on the other side, with the question about why this contradiction persists—finding the answer in the women's own desire to persevere it. As will become clear in the next section of this paper, more recent studies have shown that the realm of Indian women is vastly complex, and a compliant behaviour can neither be straightforwardly interpreted as an acceptance of the status quo, nor as the adoption of a false consciousness. With the rise of third-wave feminism, the unified, crystallised vision of the Sanskritised Indian woman, the *devī*, is re-evaluated and juxtaposed with the alternative, at times dissident voices of Dalit-, fisher- or business-women, enabling an increasingly variegated understanding of the multifarious expressions of Indian womanhood.

## THE IMAGE OF THE INDIAN WOMAN IN ACADEMIC WRITING OF THE 1990s-2000s: TOWARDS A MORE COMPLEX IDENTITY

---

Whereas one of the primary aims of second-wave feminism, as it was conceived in the West, was to make the private lives of women public, from the 1990s onwards it was women who were not secluded in their homes, and often understood to be endowed with various forms

---

<sup>12</sup> It may be useful to remember that Christianity is also pervaded by similar promises of redemption and future glory made to the poorest and most oppressed of people, precisely *because* of qualities inherent in the latter's subaltern conditions.



of agency, who became the protagonists of numerous ethnographies.<sup>13</sup> This shift of interest in the perception of women can be viewed as a product of changes occurring in the theoretical landscape: on the larger scale, the rather fluid and practice-oriented approaches of Foucauldian discursiveness and Bourdieuan Practice Theory gained increasing influence, questioning the rigid tenets of Structuralism; with regards to feminism in particular, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential work (1984), denouncing the Western projection of a monolithic 'Third World Woman' (1984, 333), called for the acknowledgement of the distinctive and potentially conflicting interests and desires of women inhabiting heterogeneous Western and non-Western landscapes.

These factors contributed to the demise of one of the chief premises of much early feminist theory, consisting of the distinction between anatomical sex and social gender. The separation of the materiality of the body from culture, as suggested by Sherry Ortner (1974)<sup>14</sup> and others, underlay the hope that, in reforming culture, women could be freed from biological determinism, which emphasised their reproductive functions and positioned them closer to nature than the allegedly physiologically autonomous men, thus precluding them from the domain of culture. As pointed out by Mohanty, despite their good-hearted intentions, Western feminists, by universalising Eurocentric concepts of sexuality and imposing upon them a certain fixity, promoted imperialist hierarchies that reaffirmed the superiority of first-world women. By the early 1990s, the sharp distinction between sex and gender had become untenable and was in great part replaced by the advent of gender performativity, which was to become a major component of third-wave feminism. Applying Foucault's discursiveness and J. L. Austin's performative speech act theory to gender, Judith Butler (1990) suggests that not only gender, but also sex, despite appearing essential, is an arbitrary product of specific historical and political discursive frameworks: the apparent naturalness and legitimacy of heteronormativity are but consequences of the subjects' continuous reaffirmation of the prevailing regulatory matrix through their performative actions.

While in the West this theoretical evolution led to an increasingly dynamic approach to gender and sexual identities,<sup>15</sup> ethnographic studies soon revealed that in the Indian context the materiality of the body cannot be perceived as purely performative, but has to be understood as the product of an ontological substantiality that, at least in part, determines the genders and roles of social actors.

Directly referencing Butler's theory, Cecilia Busby, in her study of a South Indian fishing village (2000), looks at how women and men perceive their gender roles, and how these are shaped based upon the relationships between wife and husband. Busby observes that, on the

---

<sup>13</sup> Among several works, figure Karin Kapadia's *Siva and her Sisters. Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* (1998), presenting women who sustain their families by working in the fields; William Sax's *Mountain Goddess. Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage* (1991), which concentrates on women (and men) accompanying their goddess on a pilgrimage; and Cecilia Busby's *The Performance of Gender: An Anthropology of Everyday Life in a South Indian Fishing Village* (2000), looking at women active in the fishing business.

<sup>14</sup> The author re-evaluated her stance in a later publication (see Ortner 1996).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Beatriz Preciado's experiments with testosterone narrated in *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013) and Patrick Califia's considerations on gender reassignment in 'Manliness' (2006).

one side, substantial bodily differences inform and govern the complementary divisions of labour between wife and husband as well as other marriage patterns; on the other side, however, culture plays a fundamental role in construing corporeal identities too, as the respective activities of wife and husband not only build upon, but also affirm and reinforce the constitutive realities of their bodies. Through the attribution of fishing to men and of household and financial matters to women, the gender distinctions that are inherent in substantial bodily differences are expressed and reaffirmed. Conversely, the performative nature of gendered activities shapes bodies by conferring them specific musculatures and habits. Gender, and therefore womanhood, is simultaneously substantial and performative.

In her study on ageing and gender in rural Bengal, Sarah Lamb (1997, 2000) also identifies a degree of gender fluidity that is nevertheless built upon an essential predisposed material substantiality. Conceiving personhood as relational, Lamb's informants shape their gendered identities through emotional and substantial exchanges (such as sexual fluids, food, or material possessions) with others and their environments. Crucially, while the making and unmaking of such ties at key moments in their lives underlie the gendering of persons in rural Bengal, the quality, frequency and direction that such ties can take in the development of identities, are predetermined and specific to a person's biological sex. Lamb, similarly to Busby, thus reaffirms a model of gender that is at the same time processual and performative on the one side, and material and essential on the other.

Whereas Foucault's discourse analysis, with its emphasis on historicity and contextuality, influenced the development of new approaches to gender and sex, which enabled an understanding beyond dichotomous sex-gender models and offered instead more comprehensive and variegated images of women, the emphasis on agency, which was driven by the increasing relevance that actions and subjects assumed in Pierre Bourdieu's Practice Theory, led to a more nuanced awareness of the desires and interests of women and their capacity to influence the world.

The turn to agency was often led by a concerted effort to look beyond dominant—mostly male—interpretations of gender roles and behaviours, in order to uncover the heretofore-unheard voices of women. Julia Leslie's edited collection of essays titled *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (1992), for instance, aims at documenting how women 'see themselves not as victims of their culture but as active agents in the creation of their own identity' (1992, 3).

Embracing James Scott's (1990) notion of subtle, everyday forms of resistance, a number of studies directed their focus on the analysis of women's songs, which, since frequently falling outside the domain of public practices, had so far remained largely unexplored. In the women's songs that Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold (1994) recorded during their separate fieldworks in Rajasthan, emerge the alternative and subversive voices of women that vividly criticise dominant male ideologies and the power structures in force. Similarly, analysing the poetic productions of Dalit women in rural Andhra Pradesh, Sudhakar Rao (2007) observes that his informants internalise neither their subaltern status as outcastes, nor their oppressed condition in the purview of their female identity. Expressing their sorrows as doubly exploited human beings in their songs, Dalit women, far from voluntarily perpetuating current social relations, conform to exploitative systems solely due to their lack of influential means of resistance.

Through his participation in a Himalayan pilgrimage for the goddess Nandā, William Sax (1990, 1991) acquires insight into the gender narratives that are adhered to by women and men respectively. Crucially, women's understanding of their gendered selves starkly contrasts with the image of women that is propagated by men. Bringing to light women's otherwise subdued interpretation, Sax's study reveals female identities that are decidedly more rooted in their natal places and bound to their blood families, compared to how male—and thus official—recounts portray them: the immediate and complete transformation of a woman's identity that is thought to occur right after marriage as the bride moves to the husband's family house, is contradicted by the brides themselves, who maintain that there is a gradual change, which furthermore is never complete, as their ties to their natal place never entirely dissipate.

Contrary to what had previously been suggested,<sup>16</sup> the idea that the public enactment of patriarchal and upper-caste values through ritual performances in everyday life by oppressed groups indicates their acceptance of dominant power structures, is thus strongly rejected. Indian women, who in the 1970s and 1980s were still primarily viewed in the context of their subaltern condition, emerge in the 1990s and 2000s as the conscious proponents of alternative narratives and desires that question the fundamentals of patriarchy.

An assumed conflation between agency and resistance runs implicitly throughout many of these writings, suggesting that where some form of resistance is displayed, there is agency and, conversely, where there is some amount of agency, oppressed groups ought to exhibit resistance. It can be argued that, on the one hand, the emphasis upon acts of resistance—be it in the form of songs, alternative narratives, or more overt protests—has often been motivated by an intention to atone for the resilient omission of women's voices across influential past writings. On the other hand, in the absence of discernible acts of opposition, it has been postulated that the acceptance of the status quo by women and other exploited groups is to be ascribed to their subscription to a false consciousness, which leads them to mistake the interests of dominant groups for their own.

In both cases, it transpires that Indian women's desires and interests have been illustrated by inscribing them within primarily modern Western frameworks of reference, revolving around the concept of individual, independent, subject agents. Both the search for women's faculty to act upon the world on the one side, and, on the other side, where this ability is instead not discernible, the recourse to the idea of a false consciousness that masks one's innermost desires, rely upon the assumption of a self that is moved by a natural desire for

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael Moffatt, in his study of Harijan religion in South India (1979), implied that the following of unfavourable social norms meant the acceptance of one's lower status. Adhering to the structuralist Dumontian vision of a general acceptance of the Brahmanical worldview, Moffatt argues that the lowest castes, in replicating their oppression, consent to it.

freedom and self-determination.<sup>17</sup> As Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Purna Chandra Mishra (2008) argue, the rise of a thus identified concept of the self can be associated with the advancement of capitalist modes of production and of dichotomous modes of thinking, which concomitantly characterised the West from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. While the requirement of readily available labourers presumed a particular relationship of the self with mind and body—postulating an individual responding to the linear timings of industries and markets, rather than to the cyclic rhythms of kin and nature—, the Cartesian mind-body dualism elevated rationality over passions—promoting the rational and self-determining subject as the utmost expression of the modern self.

Setting aside the arbitrary ideal of individual, self-determining subject agents, Apffel-Marglin (2008), in her analysis of the Oriya Rāja Prabhā festival, documents how women and men lead lives that are determined by the cyclical rhythms of goddess Thakurani and of nature, rather than by linear time. The simultaneous celebration of the goddess' and the earth's menstruation is an event where women and men alike are required to participate in their distinctive gendered roles, so as to maintain the cosmic order and allow for the renewal of a fecund life. Through the festival, the Oriya women Apffel-Marglin lived with affirm their positive connection with their fertile bodies and their own and the goddess' *śakti*, while at the same time being perceived as auspicious by Oriya men. Rather than seeking autonomy, equality and self-determination, these women (and men) pursue complementarity between genders, as prescribed by their cosmic order. The image of woman that emerges can neither be reduced to the dichotomy sexual-inauspicious/ asexual-auspicious woman, nor does it conform to the Western notion of realisation through self-determination.<sup>18</sup>

From an image of Indian womanhood that either corresponds to the inauspicious *dāsī* or to the tame *devī*, to the current appreciation of women in their full-fledged complexity, it appears that the understanding of Indian women's identity has gained considerably in accuracy, reflecting the ever more decentred quests of postmodern academia.

## THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN POPULAR CULTURE

---

Whereas in academic writings there has been a fundamental shift from a dichotomous towards an increasingly composite outlook in the apperception of Indian women, when looking at popular culture it appears that the *devī/dāsī* opposition still figures prominently.

---

<sup>17</sup> These primarily Western frameworks are today heavily criticised also within Western scholarship, especially in feminist literature on autonomy and on the self. While early feminist literature mostly regarded the idea of autonomy with suspicion, as it was associated with 'masculinist' concepts of independence, rationality and atomistic selves (Stoljar 2015), recently there has been a shift towards re-evaluating autonomy by highlighting the relational nature of selves. In particular, feminist philosophers Diana Meyers and Marilyn Friedman support a value-neutral position, suggesting that autonomy is determined by the circumstances of the *process* through which a subject finds herself in an oppressed situation (or not), more than by the sole conditions of her situation (see for example Friedman 2014 and Meyers 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Focusing on the Piety movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2005) similarly exposes the arbitrariness of independence and self-determination as values underlying self-fulfilment.

The tendency to perceive Indian women in binary terms emerges perhaps most prominently in Indian films and TV series. Among the female characters, the housewifely, caring, chaste mother and the young woman, mostly devoted to one single man who at the end of the film becomes her husband, still largely pervade.<sup>19</sup>

The few exceptional women who are economically independent and in control of their sexuality are still often portrayed as ambiguous, predominantly negative characters. Such is the case of Silk Smitha in *The Dirty Picture* (2011), who is, ultimately, destroyed by her own sexuality; the film seems to suggest that a woman who has access to, and independent control over, her sexuality is not legitimate and will, eventually, succumb.

A subtler yet similar message comes from *Inkaar* (2013), where the main female character, ambitious, beautiful and hardworking, has to go through almost interminable ordeals to prove her capability as a good worker. Towards the end of the film, she almost resorts to her sexual appeal to advance her career. Again, the success, or even existence, of a woman outside the domestic sphere is intricately linked with her negatively charged sexuality and lust, reaffirming the connubial relationship between female sexuality, independence, and inauspiciousness.<sup>20</sup>

While there seems to be a substantial presence of women on screen who, at first sight, appear modern and independent, at a deeper level of inspection it becomes evident that the *devī/dāsī* dichotomy still underlies the plot of many productions. The currently running TV series *Jamai Raja* (airing since 2014) presents a similar pattern, with the antagonist being a greedy businesswoman who chooses her career over a loving relationship with her daughter, and the heroine, her gentle daughter, who wishes to marry the caring male protagonist and showers the children of an orphanage she runs with motherly love. The ideal woman is still motherly, wifely and gentle, whereas the business-oriented, independent woman is the flawed character. Interestingly, in this production, it is the younger generation which advocates the traditional values more strongly.

While films and TV series almost exclusively portray the lives of the elite—just as the ideal national womanhood of colonial times was intricately linked to upper caste women—, despite these being unrepresentative of the entire country, it has to be remembered, as James Lindholm (1980) observes, that directors and producers need to respond to the expectations of the public, which today encompasses an increasingly large spectrum of the Indian society, especially as TVs and cinemas reach both urban and remote areas. It is thus difficult to establish whether the dichotomous image of Indian women is still primarily driven by the

---

<sup>19</sup> See for instance the overtly misogynistic *Dabangg* (2010), wherein the hero conquers his future wife by insistently harassing her and displaying his aggressive masculinity, until she has no choice but to surrender to him; or *Namastey London* (2007), which ends with the heroine's marriage to a suitable Indian man, who reintroduces her to the traditional Indian lifestyle after her upbringing abroad.

<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the films above, *Queen* (2014) is one of the few movies that present a positive portrayal of a young woman who explores her independence.

values held by the upper classes or rather the result of a mutually reinforcing ideological exchange between the elite and the common classes.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

---

From a brief overview of some popular Indian films and TV series, it appears that the dichotomously constructed image of Indian womanhood, as suggested by anthropologists during the 1970s, remains a prominent feature in popular culture. This is in stark contrast with the images of Indian women that emerge from recent ethnographies on India.

Because the image of women in films and TV series on the one side, and the scholarly perception of Indian women on the other occupy to a great extent parallel, non-converging planes, it becomes necessary to ask how much the shift in anthropological thought, from a universal womanhood to a complex portrayal of women, is indeed representative of transformations in the identities of Indian women in everyday life.

Furthermore, is the shift in the perception of Indian women the outcome of an increased accuracy in their understanding, or could it be a product of changing theoretical paradigms in Western academia, ultimately reflecting the contemporary Western zeitgeist? It should not be forgotten that, despite its acceptance of multiple viewpoints, the postmodern framework is, essentially, the outcome of an intellectual crisis that arose and developed in the West,<sup>22</sup> and continues to be rooted in Eurocentric preoccupations.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to reflect upon the systemic power imbalance that underlies, and is perpetuated by, the interest in studying (and defining) Indian women's identities that emerged from the 1970s onwards, despite fundamental changes in the nature of their portrayals: Western scholars perpetually reaffirm Indian women's marginality, as they identify them as the 'other' to the scholar's 'self', the 'object' to the observing 'subject', the 'exotic' to the Western 'default'. Have Indian women become 'second women' to Western women, as the latter used to be the 'second sex' to men?<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Also in everyday life, the image of the pure *devī* appears to still occupy a prominent position. Despite having mobilised innumerable protests for women's rights, the infamous Delhi rape case of December 2012 has yet again brought to the fore the idea of women being the repositories of, and responsible for, society's dignity and wellbeing. Influential public figures proclaimed that the rape occurred because the victim failed to pray ardently enough or to call her molesters "brothers" (Gye and Hills 2013; Nelson 2013). The young woman had been ascribed an almighty *śakti*, which could have stopped even the force of five criminals (and ultimately murderers), if only she had been a pious, pure, auspicious wife.

<sup>22</sup> Non-Western scholars, having often been trained in the West, frequently also advocate a postmodern approach, contributing to the illusion of its ubiquitous prevalence.

<sup>23</sup> The preference for relativity and deconstructionism, which has become a significant leitmotif of Western existence, is to a large extent not applicable to the Indian context.

<sup>24</sup> Here, I allude to Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1988 [1949]).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. *Wives of the God-King: Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1985.
- . “Rhythms of Life. Ritual Time and Historical Time.” In *Rhythms of Life. Enacting the World with the Goddesses of Orissa*, edited by Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, 253–75. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique, and Mishra Purna, Chandra. “Gender and the Unitary Self. Looking at the Subaltern in Coastal Orissa.” In *Rhythms of Life. Enacting the World with the Goddesses of Orissa*, edited by Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, 159–210. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Babb, Lawrence. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975.
- Bahl, Vikas. *Queen*. Directed by Vikas Bahl. 2014. India: Viacom 18 Motion Pictures. Film.
- Bolich, G. G. *Crossdressing in Context. Dress, Gender, Transgender and Crossdressing*. Raleigh, North Carolina: Psyche’s Press, 2008.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Busby, Cecilia. *The Performance of Gender: An Anthropology of Everyday Life in a South Indian Fishing Village*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Califia, Patrick. “Manliness.” In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 434–38. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Channa Subhadra, M. “The ‘Ideal Indian Woman’: Social Imagination and Lived Realities.” In *Recent Studies on Indian Women*, edited by Kamal K. Misra and Janet H. Lowry, 37–52. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007.
- Daniel, Sheryl B. “Marriage in Tamil Culture: The Problem of Conflicting ‘Models.’” In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan S. Wadley, 61–92. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980.
- David, Kenneth. “Hidden Powers: Cultural and Socio-Economic Accounts of Jaffna Women.” In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan S. Wadley, 93–136. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. London: Picador, 1988 [1949].
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966.
- Dumont, Louis. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

- Egnor, Margaret. "On the Meaning of Śakti to Women in Tamil Nadu." In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan S. Wadley, 1–34. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980.
- Flueckiger Burkhalter, Joyce. *When the World Becomes Female: Guises of a South Indian Goddess*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Friedman, Marilyn. "Relational Autonomy and Independence." In *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, edited by Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper, 42–60. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Ghosal Sarbani, G. "Major Trends of Feminism in India." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 4 (2005): 793–812.
- Gye, Hugo, and Hills, Suzannah. "'She's as Guilty as Her Rapists': Fury as Indian Guru Blames Tragic Student, 23, for the Vicious Gang Attack Which Killed Her." *Mail Online*. Last modified 08 January 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2258422/Fury-Indian-guru-Asaram-Bapu-blames-Delhi-rape-victim-vicious-gang-attack-killed-her.html>.
- Kapadia, Karin. *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996.
- Kashyap, Abhinav. *Dabangg*. Directed by Abhinav Kashyap. 2010. India: Shree Ashtavinayak Cine Vision Ltd. Film.
- Kurtz, Stanley N. *All the Mothers Are One. Hindu India and the Cultural Reshaping of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Lamb, Sarah. "The Making and Unmaking of Persons: Notes on Aging and Gender in North India." *Ethos* 25, no. 3 (1997): 279–302.
- . *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India*. London: University of California Press, 2000.
- Leslie, Julia, ed. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers: Delhi, 1992.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 1963.
- Lindholm, James. "A Note on the Nobility of Women in Popular Tamil Fiction." In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan Wadley. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980.
- Lowry, Janet H. and Misra, Kamal K. "Travails of the Indian Woman. From Purdah to Modernity." In *Recent Studies on Indian Women*, edited by Kamal K. Misra and Janet H. Lowry, 1–34. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007.
- Luthria, Milan. *The Dirty Picture*. Directed by Milan Luthria. 2011. India: ALT Entertainment, Balaji Motion Pictures. Film.



- Mack-Canty Colleen. "Third-Wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality." *NWSA Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 154–79.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens. "The Feminist Debate over Values in Autonomy Theory." In *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, edited by Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper, 114–40. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Mishra, Sudhir. *Inkaar*. Directed by Sudhir Mishra. 2013; India: Viacom 18 Motion Pictures. Film.
- Moffatt, Michael. "Harijan Religion: Consensus at the Bottom of Caste." *American Ethnologist* 6, no. 2 (1979): 244–60.
- Mohanty, Chandra T. "Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In *Third World Woman and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by C. Mohanty, A. Russo, L. Torress, 51–80. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Nelson, Sara. "Asaram Babu, Indian Guru Suggests Late Gang Rape Victim 'Was Equally Responsible for Attack.'" *The Huffington Post*. Last updated 09 March 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/07/asaram-babu-indian-guru-gang-rape-victim-equally-responsible\\_n\\_2424739.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/07/asaram-babu-indian-guru-gang-rape-victim-equally-responsible_n_2424739.html).
- Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" In *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by M. Z. Rosaldo, L. Lamphere, 68–87. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974.
- . "So, Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" In *Making Gender. The Politics and Erotics of Culture*, edited by Sherry Ortner, 173–80. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Preciado, Beatriz.. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013.
- Raheja, Gloria G. and Gold, Ann G. *Listen to the Heron's Words. Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Rao, Sangieta. *Jamai Raja*. Directed by Sangieta Rao, Rohit Diwedi. Written by Abhishek Kumar, Pranjal Saxena. Zee TV, August 4, 2014 – March 3, 2017.
- Rao, Sudhakar N. "Dalit Women's Voices in Rural Andhra Pradesh, India." In *Recent Studies on Indian Women*, edited by Kamal K. Misra and Janet H. Lowry, 79–103. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007.
- Reynolds, Holly Baker. "The Auspicious Married Woman." In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan S. Wadley, 35–60. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980.
- Sax, William. "Village Daughter, Village Goddess: Residence, Gender, and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage." *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 3 (1990): 491–512.
- . *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Shah, Vipul Amrutlal. *Namastey London*. Directed by Vipul Amrutlal Shah. 2007. India: Viacom 18 Motion Pictures. Film.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive. Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988.

Stoljar, Natalie. "Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy." Edited by Edward N. Zalta. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed February 18, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/feminism-autonomy/> .

Wadley, Susan. "Women and the Hindu Tradition." *Signs* 3, no. 1 (1977): 113–25.

———. Introduction to *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan Wadley, ix–xix. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980a.

———. "The Paradoxical Powers of Tamil Women." In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by Susan S. Wadley, 153–67. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980b.

———. *The Powers of Tamil Women*. Edited by Susan S. Wadley. New Delhi: Manohar, 1980c.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

Monika Hirmer is currently pursuing a PhD in the Department of Religions and Philosophies, SOAS, University of London, where she is looking at contemporary South Indian Tantric tradition and its implications for gender relations. As of 2008, prior to coming to London, Monika spent extended periods of time in India, working with the Goethe-Zentrum, Hyderabad and the German Research Foundation (DFG) first, and then pursuing her MPhil in Anthropology from the University of Hyderabad (2015). She holds an MA in South Asian Area Studies from SOAS (2007) and a BA in Media and Journalism from the University of Florence (2006). Monika's research interests comprise Hindu religious traditions, gender, concepts of personhood and ritual. Her current research is funded by the V. P. Kanitkar Memorial Scholarship.