Pineapples and Oranges, Brahmins and Shudras: Periyar Feminists and Narratives of Gender and Regional Identity in South India

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Abstract: This paper explores the way POWER, a women's organization in Tamil Nadu, draws upon the legacy of Dravidian nationalism in its implementation of feminism. I examine three narrative situations that take place in an area school where POWER is housed. I explore the extent to which their interpretation of feminism provides a context for the emergence of critical practices that attend to inequalities of caste, gender and class and the extent to which it provides avenues for making changes in women's lives. POWER is exemplary of women's organizations that are attached to social movements and which I argue should gain increased attention in anthropology. Drawing on a feminist practice approach I suggest that ethnographic methods provide an important means to capture the way such organizations reproduce and challenge social inequalities which may be culturally situated, but which also embrace globalizing practices in which feminism itself is deeply embedded.

Keywords: gender, feminism, development, Dravidian Social Movements

Résumé : Cet article explore la manière dont POWER, une organisation féminine du Tamil Nadu, utilise le legs du natio-nalisme Dravidien dans la mise en oeuvre de son féminisme. J'examine trois situations narratives qui ont lieu dans une école de secteur où POWER est logée. J'explore jusqu'à quel point leur interprétation du féminisme fournit un contexte pour l'apparition des pratiques critiques qui se rapportent aux inégalités de caste, de genre et de classe et jusqu'à point aux-quels elle fournit des avenues pour accomplir des changements dans la vie des femmes. POWER est un exemple d'organismes féministes qui se consacrent aux mouvements sociaux et qui, à mon avis, devrait attirer davantage l'attention en anthropolo-gie. M'appuyant sur une approche de pratique féministe je soutiens que les méthodes ethnographiques fournissent un moyen important pour saisir la manière que de tels organisa-tions se reproduisent et défient les inégalités sociales qui peu-vent être situées dans des cultures

Mots-clés : rapports sociaux de sexe, féminisme, développe-ment, mouvements sociaux dravidiens

Pineapples and Oranges, the title of this paper, is the metaphor for caste difference that "Periyar femi-nists"[1] employed in a consciousness raising activity at the Periyar Polytechnic school for girls in Tamil Nadu, south India. The purpose of the exercise was to demon-strate the persistence of caste difference, and the shared experiences of women who followed Hindu practices. The activity was designed for the mostly lower, "Back-ward Caste"[2] teachers and staff who work at the school. Women were seated in a circle and arbitrarily desig-nated in sequence as "pineapples, apples, bananas or oranges." These fruits correspond to Brahmins, Ksha-tryias, Vaiyshas and Shudras, the four Varna which hier-archically classify people within the Hindu caste system. The women were asked to stand up and move to distin-guish whom they could marry and with whom they would normally socialize. In response, pineapples, rep-resenting Brahmins, congregated at one portion of the circle while oranges, representing Shudras, ended up opposite them. After many more questions, the women were encouraged to imagine a society where fruits mixed, by moving about the circle in free association.

During the winter of 2000, I lived in the Periyar Polytechnic and participated in the events organized by Periyar feminists, including the activity described above. I sought to answer the call by Kamala Visweswaran for feminist anthropology to consider the "shape feminism takes in other parts of the world," (Visweswaran, 1995: 615) including the relationship between feminism and women's participation in related social movements. While women's social and political agency is well documented by feminist anthropology, only more recently is some attention paid to the diverse responses of women as actors in social movements and their deployment of feminism specifically in these forms of activism.[3] This is an important direction for feminist anthropology to take, in order to apprehend women's participation in modernity, and because "feminism"

itself is now an "inescapable term of reference" (Abu-Lughod, 1998: 3) in the gender politics of postcolonial societies. Specifically, women's activism unfolds in specific social contexts and it articulates with pre-existing or emergent ideologies and practices, including nationalist, environmental, labour, and fundamentalist mobilizations. These movements impact on the way women interpret feminist practices and the way social issues, gendered experiences and utopian visions are imagined.

In this paper I examine the way Periyar feminists in south India draw upon their attachment to a social movement in their interpretation of feminism. I explore the extent to which Periyar feminism provides a context for the emergence of critical practices that attend to inequalities of caste, gender and class and the extent to which it provides avenues for making changes in women's lives.

Periyar feminists are teachers and staff who formed POWER, a women's organization and NGO, during an exchange with educators in Newfoundland, Canada. However, the structure of the organization and the analysis of women's "empowerment" and "inequality" which informs their activities is framed by their membership in a regional social movement, the Dravidiar Kazhagam. This movement emerged during the height of resistance to British colonial rule in the early 20th century and forms the basis for Dravidian nationalism in Tamil Nadu. Periyar feminism resonates with this ideology and the particular vision of its founder, E.V. Ramsamy Naicker, who is fondly and reverently known to his followers, as Periyar, meaning the "Great Leader."[4] Hence, women's oppression is officially understood as an effect of Brahmin and Hindu dominance, and religious, caste and linguistic difference within India. At the same time, POWER is an organization that explicitly draws upon feminist practices. It deploys consciousness-raising strategies and conveys a gender analysis that its organizers perceive to be connected to feminism, transnationally, and within India.

I suggest, through an analysis of several narrative contexts, that feminist discourse can reproduce existing social inequalities, and yet challenge them, particularly when it draws upon, but does not merely reproduce, culturally located social practices. Women associated with POWER, their subjectivities, their participation, and the webs of power, privilege and inequalities in which they are embedded, are constituted by complex social and political fields: Transnational development initiatives, a selective use of feminism, and the relations of caste, gender, and linguistic differences which inform the Dravidian movement and Indian society. Hence,

POWER exemplifies an expanding and common form of women's organization cross-culturally, those which tend to be "directed" (Molyneux, 998: 229) by the agenda set by social movements or states. The complex and varied impact this trend engenders resurrects old debates in new ways which anthropologists are well positioned to examine.

The expansion of women's, and gender-based issues into international governing, development, and social movement discourses provokes reflection on the impact of feminism as a discourse and a transnational social movement. Time worn debates prevail. Are women's needs and interests best served through autonomous organizations? What do women gain or lose when they participate in organizations that attend to national liberation, cultural identity, poverty or environmental issues?[5] Should strategies for change involve an "engagement" with pre-existing institutions and cultural practices? (Basu, 1995; Razavi and Miller, 1998). If so, what is the impact on protest-oriented activism?

Feminist anthropology has critically challenged western feminist projects, (Gordon, 1999; Strathern, 1987; Wisweswaran, 1997; Wittrup, 1993; Wolf, 1996) to favour broadly construed, culturally specific understandings of gender, resistance and power. This exemplifies anthropology's general reluctance to embrace macro frameworks for understanding social and political agency, and to situate everyday forms of activism and resistance culturally and historically (Edelman, 2000: 309). This is particularly important to capture in settings where social and political barriers render radical responses by women impractical, dangerous or impossible. Such a position however, reflects a cultural sensitivity that is politically charged and often promoted by governing bodies. It may favour reformism, marginalize protest-orientated activism and de-politicize issues (Assies and Salman, 2000: 293; Razavi and Miller, 1998).

Consider that "women's issues" are now addressed in a wide range of social movements and within government and international bodies, all of which may draw selectively on empowerment, women and/or gender-based analysis to institute and legitimate changes in womens' lives in varying and potentially divergent ways (Kabeer, 1999). Debates over effective strategy, and the nature of gender and power occur in a context where the mainstreaming of gender issues is either applauded, or scrutinized as an instrument of international governing practices (Goetz, 1998: 45-47; Miller and Razavi, 1998: 3-4). Such debates are played out in India where thousands of voluntary organizations flourish alongside women-centred organizations; both can be ambiguously

structured, as vehicles of advocacy, as NGOs, as service providers and are often tied to bilateral donors, international activist organizations and the Indian and regional governments (John, 2001: 100-113). India joins in the cry against dowry, violence against women, the feminization of poverty and the social stigmatization of girls and women to give the impression that there is some shared understanding of the problems women face.

However, the appearance of common fronts in gender issues belies the contradictory and conflicting positions beneath over how these issues should be addressed. This makes it crucial to track the way feminisms are deployed, embedded or implicated in practices which may both challenge and reproduce social and economic inequalities and social orders. It is also important for examining the way feminism becomes implicated in marginalizing or activating groups of women.

In India, autonomous women's organizations have flourished (Agnew, 1997; Kannabirin, and Kannabirin, 1997). Yet, ideas about westernization articulate with local social and cultural relations of power to produce what Ray refers to as "political fields" (Ray, 1999). These fields position women's participation in specific directions that can include or marginalize a woman's centred approach and the expression of transnational feminist identities. The definition of feminism itself and the meaning of women's interests, becomes implicated in debates over westernization. In India, stereotypes of feminism as a selfish, individualistic assertion of rights, embodies the excesses of Western individualism (Narayan, 1997: 3-10).

An anthropological perspective can highlight how political fields are culturally mediated, supported or contested within social domains. This includes schools, NGOs and women's organizations, such as POWER, where modernizing processes and emancipatory practices intersect with gender norms and historically rooted social relations (cf Fox and Stern, 1997). However, given the concern to avoid Western feminist imperialism, the self-reflexive orientation of a feminist practice approach is important here, to acknowledge the way women's movements and feminism itself is constituted in a transnational context of power where ideas "migrate" (Marsh, 1998: 666) in an uneven circulation of exchange.

Feminists point to numerous ways of addressing feminist field work dilemmas (Wolf, 1996)[6] including Visweswaran's call for feminist anthropologists to take a position of dis-identification (Visweswaran, 1997). The purpose of this starting point, which I draw upon here, is twofold: To avoid the assumption that gender is an essential commonality between ethnographer and subjects (Visweswaran, 1997); and to situate the anthropologist in an analysis that seeks to capture the way inequalities are reproduced and transformed at the crossroads of structured relations and subjective responses (Wolf, 1996; Roseman, 1999: 212).

Here, I examine POWER from its own self-identified position, as a reformist women's organization, which uses "feminism" selectively. Strategies for change are perceived to be connected to Periyar's ideology, and a sense of what is appropriate for Indian and specifically, Tamil society as articulated by its leaders. I explore three narrative contexts to analyze the way gender, related social inequalities and feminism are framed and interpreted by local women, particularly leaders of POWER. Two of these narratives—public celebrations where POWER's initiatives were promoted, and "gender awareness" workshops, were held at the school where POWER is located, and were generated by its leaders and members of the DK. However, my analysis also derives from a third context, the personal narratives of female leaders of POWER and other group discussions that I was more instrumental in initiating.

The attention to narrative shares much with attempts to culturally locate "narratives of resistance" as diagnostics of power (Abu-Lughod, 1990); and yet, as "social disruptions" narratives can also unsettle the normative flow of social scripts, to reveal relations of inequality (Roseman, 1999: 212). The ethnographic thrust here is the assumption that such narratives unfold within specific social sites of action where cultural meanings are produced and contested and in which the local, global and national intersect, an approach that is often missing from critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2000: 460). I am interested however, in narrative contexts where feminist practices are enacted, with the assumption that social movements, as discourses of transformation, produce agency, including expressions of resistance to the movements themselves. They also privilege certain experiences over others and can exclude specific groups of women.[7]

Schools are particularly important sites for the reproduction of culture and the creation of modern subjects. The offer "increased freedom and opportunity," (Levinson and Holland, 1996: 1-9) particularly for women who have long been a focus of debate within educational, colonial, state and international development agenda in India. (Forbes, 1996; Sudarshan, 2000). Yet, schools can both reproduce and reconstitute social orders, including the subjectivities of staff, teachers and students (Porter, 1998). Schools are a site where the

legacy of Dravidian nationalism, gender identities and feminist practices are inscribed and deployed to socialize, and activate teachers, staff and students in Tamil Nadu. Periyar feminism unfolds in a political field, where powerful social and cultural forces support the expression of women's chastity, and caste-based marriage in spite of rapid changes and uneven processes of urbanization. I summarize these dynamics briefly below, before turning to the narratives which prevailed at the school.

The Context of Gender and POWER

POWER is housed in a Polytechnic school for girls, in the semirural outskirts of Tanjore, the "rice belt" district of south India. The Polytechnic is redolent with Periyar's ideology and rhetoric. Slogans such as "Chastity symbolizes slavery of women and makes her anybody's chattel," for example, are inscribed above the classroom doorways and along the interior courtyard. Since its formation, POWER has focused its activity on schools and some 50 villages that surround them. It has addressed infanticide amongst certain caste groups, and violence against women, and established income generating schemes, training programs and poverty alleviation schemes for destitute and abandoned women and widows. The Polytechnic itself, comprised of 150 staff and 500 students, offers commercial, architectural, engineering and computer training to girls aged 16 to 20. Some of these girls will continue their education at the nearby Periyar engineering college that offers degrees for young women, aged 18 to 25 and a few men. Others, will marry and get paid work, or return to their villages and tend to families. Most of the women included here are from rural, semirural or smaller towns. There are few Brahmin or "forward" caste women at the school, and "scheduled caste" women are represented, but mainly as support staff, (cleaners, sweepers, servers); as clients in villages, as well as young female students. A survey I conducted of 746 staff and students at both schools shows that 87% of them are Hindu, mostly from the Backward Caste, 36%, followed by Scheduled castes, 12.6%; Most Backward castes, 11%; Forward castes, 5.6%. There were no Brahmins in the samples I took. Over half of the respondents however, self-identified as "middle caste." The women connected to POWER through the school represent a cross-section of women in rural and semi-urban Tamil society, and their relative education, class and caste position reflects emergent differences between women, and the uneven, changing status of women's lives in this region.

Tamil women are perceived as having relatively greater autonomy, mobility and control in relation to men, than their north Indian counterparts. While I do not embark here on a comparative assessment of women's lives in India, I point to the fact that this assumption was common amongst Tamil women I met. It also has some support in ethnographic and social science research (Kabeer, 1999; Kapadia, 1993; Lessinger, 1989; Vero-Sanso, 1998/99) including women's relatively higher literacy and lower fertility rates (Basu, 1999: 238-240; Kabeer, 1999: 452-456) and in the historical practices of some "Backward" castes, which are characterized as "Dravidian." For example, historically, the relative higher status of Tamil women—particularly, non-Brahmin Tamil women was attributed to the predominance of a Dravidian kinship system which favoured village and kin endogamy (in contrast to village exogamy practiced in the north) and engendered strong matri-lateral social ties that cross-cut patrilineality (Kapadia, 1993; Vero-Sanso, 1998/9).

Changes in the last few decades include uneven patterns of urbanization and industrialization, increased participation of women in education and the paid workforce and changes in fertility and reproductive patterns (Basu,1999; Kabeer, 1999). Women have gained increased opportunity and formal equality from these changes. Moreover, there is some indication that while some women are both gaining status and control over their lives, others are losing customary rights and obligations that historically provided women with some spheres of relative influence and power in rural areas (Kapadia, 1993). Some studies suggest that the uneven and accelerated urbanization and the upward mobility of lower caste groups in Tamil Nadu has generated a shift toward emulating north Indian practices, particularly of dowry, son preference and a decline in matri-lateral marriage ties (Kapadia, 1993; Basu, 1999).

The Indian Government does not provide compulsory, free and universal primary education and only 59% of children between the ages of five and 14 attend school. This makes education, as it has been since the colonial period, a significant source of either empowerment or inequality depending on one's access. Education has increased divisions within kin and caste groups particularly in rural areas. Although women's access to education is increasing, sons are still more likely to be educated over daughters because they are preferred in terms of cash investments (Kapadia, 1993: 35) and because they are perceived to be the future breadwinners. It is often considered that parents already invest in daughters through dowry. Moreover, education differ-

ences in lower-and middle-caste rural households have increased as higher educated men seek educated women who are then withdrawn from rural work to live as wives in semi-seclusion. (Kapadia, 1993: 39). At the same time, literacy rates for women are high in Tamil Nadu, at 51.3% compared to 25.3% literacy for women living in a north Indian state such as Uttar Pradesh. Yet, they lag far behind Kerala.[8]

These factors may be weakening the importance of, and control exercised within the joint family. This family arrangement historically placed constraint on wives, particularly the newly married. However, in her study of urban families, Vero-Sanso (1998/9) challenges the notion that daughter-in-laws are still submissive to their dominant mother-in-laws in many urban households. These changes have created more varied residence arrangements and in some cases, transformed the dynamics of living in the joint family household, particularly in urban areas (Vero-Sanso, 1989/9). Increasingly, newly married couples reside in separate households from their paternal parents, and often at a distance. Now, in some cases, elderly parents may move to the houses of their children (not the reverse). Moreover, women's education provides them, or rather their parents, with more bargaining power in dowry negotiations. Once married, their power for example, in decision-making in the joint family is enhanced should they remain in paid employment after marriage.

Nonetheless, women are expected to perform as sacrificing mothers, obedient daughters-in-law and wives, social roles that support chastity as an expression of femininity and form a dominant script. These norms frame the way women are evaluated and enabled to participate in the "public sphere" (Dickey, 2000; 468-469). The practice of female modesty and chastity shapes female and male relations and fosters segregation between men and women. This ethos of male and female "avoidance" is more flexible in Tamil Nadu, but it nonetheless, shares cultural assumptions with more rigid practices found in the north (Dickey, 2000: 468; Lessinger, 1989: 109). Such values shape women's mobility, the range and extent of their choices in paid work and family life as well as their sexuality, in spite of differences between Adi-Dravida and Moslem women for example (Kapadia, 1995: 5; Lessinger, 1989). Chastity, and parent-arranged marriage supports the maintenance of caste which remains a central means of organizing family, reproduction and one's social networks.

Finally, the expansion of Westernized stereotypes in the media in addition to Tamil romance stories, combine to create a contradictory set of images for women: they are normally expected to conform to their parents' choices, and to engage in arranged, caste-endogamous marriage. And yet, in popular culture, women are cast as lovers, divas, sacrificing mothers, sisters, wives, and schemers. They are depicted as bold, lascivious, autonomous, and independent, as well as devoted, dependent and self-sacrificing. This makes it increasingly confusing for young Tamil women to understand their own place in Indian society. The mixed messages these images convey reflect both an increase in women's opportunities and an increase in their responsibilities and pressures, as well as broader changes in Indian society.

As surveys and interviews revealed however, students, including those from villages (more than half), are obtaining an education because their parents perceive it to be important for obtaining both a good husband and possible employment. Yet, these parents also demand strict codes of chastity for their daughters and a school environment that encourages feminine respectability and discourages "love" matches. Most teachers in fact, favour mixed gender schooling. Although they also acknowledge the positive effects of a female-peer environment, the gender segregation is in part a response to parental demands.

A bust of Periyar is situated at the dusty crossroads, equidistant to the school and a nearby Periyar Engineering College. It signifies the strong support inhabitants of this district have displayed for the Dravidian movement and the political offshoots it spawned (Barnett, 1976). Periyar was a founding leader of the Dravidian movement, beginning with the Self-Respect Movement in the 1930s, which became the *Dravidar Kazhagam* in 1944. Periyar, like other social reformers (Forbes, 1996; Sinha, 1994), connected women's subordination to colonial oppression; however, he focussed on Brahmin dominance in religious, economic and political affairs as the source of both women's and Tamil subordination. These inequalities which prevailed in 19th-century Tamil Nadu, had precipitated the formation of an anti-Brahmin movement amongst non-Brahmin Tamils who, in spite of their own social and economic divisions, were subsumed by their common classification as "Backward Castes."[9] From the 1930s onward, Periyar sought women's equality by promoting education, paid work and widow remarriage, and by arguing against arranged, caste-based marriages.

The critical edge of Dravidian nationalism was the way it deployed the discourse of social reform—to tie women's subordination to a larger struggle for the emancipation of Dravidian, non-Brahmins, from both colonial and Brahmin oppression (Forbes, 1996: 73-76).

Although it gave up in the attempt to create a separate Dravida state, the movement contributed to the recognition of ethnic/linguistic minorities within the nation and alleviated the social and religious restrictions Hinduism placed on the mobility, opportunities and valuation of lower-caste groups.

Dravidian nationalism de-centred Indian nationalism at a particular historical moment (Ramaswamy, 1994: 309) particularly from the 1930s into the 1960s. However, from the 1950s onward, the DK remained a social movement and became increasingly sidelined by the growth and success of Dravidian political parties that continue to dominate Tamil Nadu state politics. Today, it is arguable that the complex history of Tamil Nadu is subsumed by a historical cultural narrative which emphasizes the original settlement of Dravidian peoples, as opposed to the Aryan oppressors who brought Brahminism and caste to south India. A regional hegemony is conveyed through a selected tradition of *Dravida* culture (Ramaswamy, 1994) and a profound reverence for Dravidian political leaders, particularly those associated with the very popular Tamil film industry (Pandian, 1989; 1991). This hegemony is supported by the political and economic dominance of castes who fall within the "backward" category and the relative under-development of a specifically *Dalit* politics and consciousness in the region (Moses, 1995).

Periyar is often singled out for encouraging women to move beyond the cultural boxes in which they were placed. He was committed to modernist projects, and emphasized rational, secular thought, scientific, and planned development. Moreover, following Periyar's belief that consciousness raising should precede electoral politics, the DK identified itself as a social movement, not a political party. Tamil consciousness was scripted in schools (Ramaswamy, 1994: 309) which were sites for the reproduction of Dravidian nationalism. It is not surprising that the movement turned its energies towards education in the 1970s to establish schools for girls in sciences and higher education in the early 1980s.

Narratives of gender and change that prevail at the school reinforce Dravidian nationalism as an oppositional culture that Periyar symbolizes. How does Periyar's legacy inform the construction of female subjectivities, and women's interpretations of their lives?

Periyar Feminist Narratives: Honouring Periyar and Promoting POWER

At the Polytechnic, Periyar feminism informs the way female subjectivity is constructed through teaching and mentoring, in the numerous public events which are held to honour the accomplishments of teachers and students and to promote the school as a legacy of Periyar and vanguard of the movement. Leaders invoke Periyar feminism selectively; but more often, it is reflected in guises that signify their analysis of gender, women's oppression and their approach to social change. In addition to regular classes, students attend one session per week where Periyar's vision, and his historical significance are recounted by guest lecturers. Numerous events, including graduation, "Annual School Days" and "Open Houses" to inaugurate new programs are held at the school and provide an opportunity to promote POWER, to honour successful students and Periyar as the founding father of the Dravidian movement.

These public events may include an audience of parents, local officials, politicians, and members of the DK. They provide a platform for regional politicians to situate current political issues in the legacy of Dravidian nationalism as an oppositional culture, which Periyar has come to signify. These events are scripted in a way that resonates with the Dravidian movement in the way women's issues are tied to a critical stance towards visions of Indian nation building, particularly nationalist expressions of Hindu communalism which are perceived to support Brahmin dominance. But, while women's issues form a symbolic focus, women as actors are scripted as a supporting cast in the public celebration of the Dravidian movement.

One event which drew several hundred to the schools was held ostensibly to honour female engineering students and to inaugurate the opening of an environmentally sustainable house these women had designed. On that day, the activities began at the Polytechnic, with the arrival of the invited guests, and the current chairmen of the Periyar Foundation who is also the leader of the DK. The students, all female, sporting their school uniforms of black pants and white shirts, were lined single file along the road that led from the security gate to the main school building. The guests (mostly representatives of political parties) arriving by car, and on foot, were greeted by school staff, more students, and a hundred or more guests who were dressed in black and white *lunghis* and *saris*, the ceremonial colours of the *Dravidar Kazhagam*. Female cadets, (who were also students) clad in khaki uniforms, stood in military formation and saluted each guest as they took their place on a covered podium. Guests proceeded to the engineering college, where younger girls, from a neighbouring Periyar matriculation school were already seated on the ground in front of a large stage where a large painting of Periyar provided the pictorial backdrop for the seated guests.

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The ceremony began with the Dravidian anthem and dances performed by girls of different ages. The songs welcomed visitors to the event and provided social commentaries on women's lives: the problems surrounding family planning and female infanticide were contrasted with the boldness and confidence women gained by living within Periyar ideology. The representatives of various political parties dotted their speeches with commentary on current political issues, critiques of the rising significance of Hindu communalism, and references to Periyar, including anecdotes from those older men who knew and worked with him.

On the surface, women seemed to be inserted in the event as a supporting cast in the reproduction of a male dominated movement. While most dancers, presenters and helpers were women, all of the honoured guests and speech-makers were male. Yet, young women were well represented amongst those honoured for their contribution to the design of the house. While women were notably absent from public speaking at these kind of events, they did provide introductions and commentary on numerous smaller scale occasions and were encouraged to do so. In other events, Periyar's analysis of gender and inequality was incorporated into official introductions. During one Annual Day celebration for example, the audience of graduating and junior students were congratulated by the leader of the DK, who drew on their success to highlight the benefits for women of a Periyar education. Reciting passages from Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, he suggested, following de Beauvoir, that women's fate was not a foregone conclusion, but in the case of India, a reflection of the "myths of Manu."[10] Just as de Beauvoir called for women to free themselves from the destiny of biology, so too, should young women reject superstitious Hindu beliefs and Brahmanic myths that oppress and impede them from "coming out" and realizing their full equality.

The structure of these events makes it difficult to ascertain how girls and women are interpreting the messages of Periyar feminism, or the extent to which it bears upon their lives. The organization of the events seems to replicate Periyar's own focus on consciousness raising through didactic techniques which were aimed at reaching an audience through speech making. This method was explicitly mentioned by the leader of the DK as he fondly recalled the way Periyar's speeches stirred his interest as a very young man. By contrast, workshops are distinctly different in format, as I illustrate below. I outline a few feminist narratives that were recounted during these workshops and focus specifically on a Periyar feminist narrative that introduced the

event. Then I examine the responses of participants to consider the extent to which Periyar feminist narratives frames these experiences and produces critical reflection.

Gender Workshops: Narratives of Women's and Caste Subordination

> "Every person in India, regardless of caste, sex, religion, has a right to freedom, but not a right to change their caste. It is a determining feature of India."

> "I equal Tamil feminism to Periyar, through stories. He was a great teacher. The DK isn't a political party—it is an ideology. Periyar's views are safeguarded here." — A Periyar feminist leader

"Gender" workshops have been utilized to provide a context for women to interact and are perceived as an innovative, feminist forum because their format contrasts dramatically with teaching and learning methods employed at the school and because women learned this format through participation in gender and women-focussed conferences. Periyar feminist leaders and other teachers have attended workshops in Newfoundland, Tamil Nadu and other states, which focussed on a variety of topics, including leadership, entrepreneurship and violence and sexual harassment and were organized by international bilateral donors, women's organizations, and governments.

Three all-day workshops were held during my residence which were attended by 90 women who worked as teachers and staff at three schools, as well as a few POWER leaders.[11] All were held in classrooms at one of the Periyar schools and were similar in format. The rearrangement of chairs from rows into circles, the use of brainstorming, small group discussion and facilitators, as well as the incorporation of evaluation are considered innovations. Many participants were uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the format, particularly the encouragement of individual personal storytelling, which they perceived to be a Western tendency towards "public confession."

Consider the narrative that followed the Pineapples and Oranges activity. *A*, a Periyar feminist leader, outlined the essential features of Periyar feminism, including the centrality of caste and religion in shaping the life of women and social inequalities that pervade in India. "Women's lives are shaped by caste, gender and class," she argued, "but these forces are not of equal significance." Rather, "women's fate" is determined by her caste and religious scripts which dictate that "our body

is our destiny." In spite of women's entry into higher education "she is still sent to her in-law's house." Moreover, Indians, she argued, could theoretically change their language, their place of residence, their economic status—"everything but their caste." "In other countries they say that class is the key element. But economic status is not rigid. In India? It is caste. Caste is fixed. How did this happen?"

The historical narrative that followed outlined the rich tradition of Tamil culture and the transformation and subordination of that culture by the Aryan invasion and Brahmin dominance.

"Before, people lived according to the five landscapes, with nature. People from the hills, from the fields, from coastal places. There was no hierarchy. Then came the entry of Brahmin culture. There came a change in marriage customs; change in the way padi and water are poured. Before, men and children also wore tali. Only later did it become a symbol of chastity, a bond relationship of women to their husbands. Even now women worry that if they do not wear their tali, something bad will come to their husbands."

She reminded listeners that the creation story, the Purusa, in which Brahmins emerge from the head, Kshatryias from shoulders, and Shudras the feet, was nothing but a myth. It is these values of Brahminical purity and superiority, she argued, now removed from its economic and occupational moorings, that reigns in India and ultimately shapes women's subordination. Lower castes strive to imitate "the higher ups," to gain status, to observe Brahminical rule and restrictions. Yet, women, she argued, will never attain the purity that is sought. "We do not think of the strength of our own body and its beauty. Delivery is seen as polluting; our stages of life are called impure; that which doesn't happen to men's bodies are called impure. Why do women kill their female child? It's not just economic. Why isn't a girl child preferable? While the Hindu "myths of Manu" ensure that women can never attain purity, "in Dravidian culture, women were given importance. Women are goddesses; the virgin goddess, called mother. All her people are her children."

A completed her lecture by reminding participants to act individually, but in the collective of their "society," their "community," terms which are often used when referring to one's kin and caste-based social networks. By contrast, two local activists, who were not members of POWER, drew on the expression "the personal is political" to inspire participants to act. Their talks focussed on the religion and the history of women's political activism in south India as told through their

own experiences. N declared to the women, "You all have good salaries, an education, a job, why should you worry about others? Why should you be activists?" Later, P, a 60-year-old activist responded that while "politics takes place in the tea shops and women remain in the kitchen...change is in the air." She then detailed the extensive grassroots organizations and female-headed NGOs that operate in Tamil Nadu, some to protest, others to lobby government. P linked these local groups to the most recent conference on violence in Trichy, the National Alliance of Women's Organization, the Asia Pacific Women's Forum and called on women to think "globally and act locally."

Interpreting Periyar Feminism and Women's Experiences

During these workshops female participants between the ages of 25 and 50, commented on these issues and revealed different interpretations of Periyar feminism and similarities and differences in their own life experiences. Their opinions were framed discursively by the context in which they were held: the school where these women work, study and live; and by the presence of Periyar female leaders, and a "Western" anthropologist. To summarize: discussion ranged from the importance of, and ambivalence towards, both caste and family, women's difficulties in managing family and work, the nature of male dominance in Indian society; and the impact of Westernization and the Western women's movement on Indian society. However, it is noteworthy that women focussed particularly on caste, family and the role models afforded to them. Moreover, their insights conveyed ambivalence towards or contradicted Periyar's ideology, in spite of their awareness of this ideology and the presence of female leaders.

For example, women countered Periyar's secular vision by arguing that it was not religion itself that was meaningful, but the family rituals and responsibilities that were tied to religious practice, that were of value. While Periyar preached "boldness," liberation from caste, and women to engage in paid work, family formed the anchor from which these women understood the dilemmas they face. How for example, can one continually "adjust" as they are expected to do? Many women sought practical advice on how one could manage conflicts with husbands and with in-laws or strategies they could use to change divisions of labour in the house that women were finding increasingly difficult to juggle.

One Hindu woman recounted the ostracism she faced for a decade or more when she married a Moslem. Now, she worried about the marriage prospects for her

son and the difficulties she faced in obtaining a good dowry. Women's opinions over domestic violence ranged from ambivalence, moral outrage, and amongst a few, older women, the view that wife beating, although a common problem, had to be suffered through. Blame was placed on husband and wife, the bad character of a family or the poorly arranged nature of the marital union.

Divorce was maligned by almost all participants, in favour of a permanent union of "one man, one woman." A more ambivalent attitude towards caste was reflected in the way most women argued that caste would, in some undetermined future, wither away. Yet, the same women affirmed its importance in the way marriage, family, and traditions were constituted, and its significance in their own social relations and their sense of "society." Many women acknowledge some value in allowing children to make their own marriage choices. However, the overwhelming attitude towards marriage was that it was best arranged through the mature benevolence of parents, an opinion supported by interviews which indicate that 90% of these women are or will be married in arranged, caste-based marriages. Such arrangements need not in theory be caste-based many argued, and would not be, in the next generation. Yet, only a small minority was prepared to consciously exercise more flexible marriage arrangements when asked to reflect as parents, upon the choices of their children.

This ambivalence towards caste, and the complexity of negotiating work with family was reflected in several other discussion groups and in the numerous personal narratives I recorded from women, the majority from the large, "backward caste" category, as well as some scheduled castes, and Moslem women. Themes included that of abandonment, difficulties in continuing their education, alcohol abuse, disputes over unsettled dowry, the unfair judgments applied by local caste organizations in settling family problems and the difficulties in juggling work with responsibilities and obligations in the household and larger extended family.

Elsewhere (George, 2002b), I examine the ambivalence of these women towards Periyar ideology, an opinion also reflected in the accounts of several POWER organizers. Consider B, a 35-year-old teacher who spent five weeks in Newfoundland where she learned how to organize contract training, prepare proposals, and learned about social problems and women's issues. Married to a man of the same caste who works as a professional, she resides with him, two daughters and mother-in-law who, with the help of a day servant, takes care of the children and domestic duties. Although B empha-

sizes that her husband is supportive, she is also aware that the division of labour is unequal as husbands mostly contribute by chopping vegetables and going to market with or without their children. Schedules vary only marginally in the routines women like B recounted, who begins her day by preparing breakfast and lunch at 5 a.m. B leaves for work at 7:30 and returns by 6:00 or 6:30, when she dons her "nightie" to relax, make "tiffen" with her mother-in-law, and help her daughters with their studies, until bedtime at around 10 p.m. Her working day from 8:00 until 5:00 as a teacher at the school is longer than that of her husband who works from 10:00 to 4:00. She notes, "the wife prepares; the husbands sit. He can't make tea or coffee. He rises at 6:00 or 6:30, reads the newspaper, and returns home earlier from work. There are three children waiting for me when I get home! Sometimes, I have tension."

Raised in an affluent, propertied family, she talks about the importance of caste and the arrangement of marriage:

> Caste is important but it is also changing. We like to be in the same community (caste group) but if it is inter-caste, that too is O.K. Parents are 100% involved. They look after their children. The problems with a love marriage are that the parents are not convinced especially if the marriage is with someone outside the community. Parents are concerned that daughters have the right partner. In Newfoundland, divorce was very common. That is not possible here.

While she enjoys teaching and working with students, B says, "there is no time to look after the children. I had three months maternity leave, and now during the working hours I worry about my daughter. There is no time to spend with her and my husband has more free time. He's fine, (as a husband) but I am not free."

Similar experiences were recounted by S, another participant in POWER. S is a 37-year-old mother of one daughter who lives with her husband, a doctor and at different times, with relatives from both her own and her husband's family. On the matter of marriage:

> If she (her daughter) selects someone then that will be a relief, but before that we must direct her. At adolescence, we can have an influence but it is less likely we can stop them in their decisions after they reach 25. We have to look for a boy if she doesn't find one, but this will not be until she is educated and has a job.

Although S claims "caste will change," when asked if inter-caste marriage is acceptable for her children, she

says, "Inter-caste marriage is not a problem, but I have to think about it." What seems far more acceptable is a loosening of caste boundaries, particularly distinctions between subcaste groups and greater flexibility. This is echoed by *M* another member of POWER who also spent five weeks in Newfoundland:

> It was a shock for us to learn how common divorce was, and that children were not with both parents; also the more frequent changing of partners; here in India, one man, one woman is predominant. My husband is from the same community (caste group) but I knew nothing of his family. I was afraid most of the time during my early marriage and I was separate from my family. Only after I had two sons did I gain confidence. It took years for me to adjust. I felt like a stranger. But we have to adjust. From birth there is the notion that we have to adjust. Some women are moving away from that. But divorce will not happen here (in India). Women suffer a lot; but they won't leave. We have to think about society, how society will laugh and ridicule us here. We have to have a practical attitude. We say, "I'm entering this marriage and this is what I have to do." Even though he's a drunkard, a woman would not leave.

In these individual, personal narratives, caste-based arranged marriage and divisions of labour in the household formed a constant in relation to changes in other living and working arrangements including an increase in women's mobility and education. Women acknowledged the problems associated with caste, dowry and marriage arrangements and supported the notion that they be overturned. In individual interviews, however, they were more reluctant to dismiss these norms when asked how they would choose to deal with their own sons and daughters (cf. Subrahmanian, 1993: 218-236).

In sum, a critical discourse on gender emerged in all three types of narratives discussed above, in that gender inequality, that is, the source and character of female subordination and male privilege informed the way women's struggles, social problems and experiences were talked about. The stories differ however, in the extent to which they were informed by a self-identified feminism and Periyar ideology.

The narratives that informed the public celebration of Periyar and POWER reinforced the focus of women and Dravidian oppression on Brahminism and Hinduism. In this analysis, women's subordination is rooted in religious dogmatism and the four *Varna* in which castes are hierarchically arranged. Emancipation in the form of "empowerment" will occur by women's entry into the paid workforce and volunteer work that will give her the confidence to "come out." While indirect reference to "feminism" was conveyed by for example, by invoking Simone de Beauvoir, feminism was more explicitly, and extensively referred to in the largely female-attended workshops.

Women, both in the dialogue generated by the workshops and in personal interviews, conveyed disagreement towards some of the movement's ideology, focussed on the family as a source of inequality and sought practical solutions. Their ambivalence toward family, caste and dowry however, reveals both their investments in these social networks and its importance for their identity.

For example, while dialogue in the workshop generated critical reflection, overtime, opinion shifted so that more than half in the group turned to an affirmation of caste, family, and the importance of a well arranged marriage. These practices were defended as aspects of "our culture" and were perceived as both the roots of difficulty and of their "protection," including their sense of security and identity. Women readily acknowledged the complex hierarchies that persist within specific caste groups, amongst Scheduled Caste Christians, and lower and higher Backward castes. Moreover, women individually also criticized the school itself, which some felt, pressured them into volunteer work and did not sufficiently address the difficulties women faced in meeting a triple workload.

This ambivalence is particularly important to capture as an expression of the culturally specific ways in which women are situated in relations of power, constraint and also, privilege to engender critical perspectives in which the movement (the DK and Periyar feminism) itself, as an employer, an agent of power, a disciplinary entity, is also included.

For example, although a few men attended the first hour of one workshop, the only men present during these events were school officials who attended to officially complete the event. One commented that it was important for women to demonstrate their "power" through commitment to the volunteer activities associated with the school. He then asked female participants to comment on the workshop. When met with dead silence, he requested that each stand up, one by one to offer an opinion. This prompted a second, and respected elder male to rise and admonish the women for failing to speak out. "What," he asked rhetorically, "is the solution to overcoming women's inequality?" "You must take your own power. It is your responsibility. It will not be given to you by we men!" He added that women must

rise as leaders at the school; they must "make claims" to their husbands—that they need time for their responsibilities at work; they need to travel in their activities.

Once these men left a few women who remained, including one of the guest speakers, expressed their ambivalence about the workshop. They noted how the intense discussion by women during the day contrasted with the "top-down" "hierarchical" and "coercive" style that ended the event and rendered these same women mute.

This incident reflected the focus on "coming out" as a way for women to make change, an orientation that was prevalent amongst POWER leaders also. It was also reflected in the call to "relinquish caste," by *B*, a feminist speaker at the workshop. Rather than placing responsibility for change on individual woman, women's "fear," "self-consciousness" and reluctance to initiate changes may also reflect their understanding of the larger structures at play in Tamil society. Female teachers are well promoted, encouraged and rewarded for volunteer work and for continuing their education. At the same time, chastity remains an important feminine virtue that, in spite of Periyar's declarations in the school hallways, is reinforced at the school. A well-secured gate ensures that men do not enter without just cause and the mobility and comportment of girls is well monitored by teachers and staff. So, to what extent does Periyar feminism reproduce and challenge social inequalities at play in Tamil society?

Reproducing and Challenging Caste and Gender

Periyar's social and political ideology was considered radical during the pre-independence period. As leader of the "Self respect movement" in the 1930s, Periyar advocated the arrangement of "self-respect marriages." This position did not, however, reflect solidarity with prominent Western feminists, such as Annie Besant, a well-known suffragette, because her fight for women's emancipation and support for Indian independence valorized Brahmin ideology. (Sinha, 1994: 25-28) and marginalized lower caste groups (Anandhi, 1997: 196; Veeramani, 1992: 8-12). Forbes (1996: 73-76) argues that the focus of the "self respect" movement on women's issues inhibited the formation of autonomous women's movements in the region. The effect was to create some space for the expression of women's issues which were increasingly marginalized and subsumed by the politicization and splits within the Dravidian movement and its quest for broad political support (Forbes, 1996: 73-76).

It has been argued that the Dravidian nationalist movement released caste somewhat from religion, and yet its focus on anti-Brahminism created a caste-based consciousness, where caste was displaced by casteism, and now underpins the way Hindu Tamils from the "Backward Castes" form alliances, and negotiate modernity (Barnett, 1976; Beteille, 1996: 163-67 Bhai, 1992). In Tamil Nadu today, caste remains a central social and political force, exemplified in occasional displays of inter caste violence and in the jockeying for power of caste based elites. Moreover, castes which fall within the "Backward" category are increasingly differentiated in a way that cross cuts class relations, to position some as landowners who profited from the Green revolution style growth of the region, and industrialists while others figure amongst the landless and unemployed poor (Gough, 1989). Dravidian cultural nationalism, therefore is, potentially both reactionary or progressive (Barnett, 1976: 3-24); it has both fostered critical political participation, buttressed the expansion of political power among elites and supported racially rooted oppositions which pit Aryan, Brahmin and North Indians against Dravidian, non-Brahmin Tamils (Dirks, 1996: 269-270).

Moreover, both critics and supporters of Tamil cultural nationalism argue that, over time, women have been subsumed in the expression of Tamil regionalist identity in the political arena and in dominant cultural representations, such as Tamil films conveying nationalist themes (Geetha, 1991; Pandian, Anandhi and Venkatachalapthy, 1991: 1059-1062). As in other dominant nation building discourses in India and elsewhere, (cf Heng, 1997: 31; Rao, 1999) they are depicted according to normative gender scripts: as mothers, as good observers of family planning or as goddesses signifying chastity, purity and feminine self-sacrifice to the service of regional social and political exigencies. The focus of the Dravidian movement on *Tamilttaay*, a female personification of the Tamil language, parallels the representation of India as *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) to reinforce these dominant images of Tamil femininity in the service of Tamil nationalism (Ramaswamy, 2001: 20).

At the same time, to focus on such dominant scripts is to offer limited insights into the way POWER incorporates women and gender issues into its agenda and tends to simplify differences within Dravidian social and political arenas. Periyar continues to symbolize a critical path in the broader field of Tamil Nadu politics where several Dravidian parties jockey for state power and take positions which seem to contradict the movements original principles, such as one Dravidian party's sup-

port for the BJP, a Hindu fundamentalist party. The DK maintains relationships with many political parties and considers itself to be a "watchdog," to quote its chairman, over national and state level initiatives. It conveys a strong regionalist identity which is critical of the growing power of Hindu fundamentalist politics, and, like many other regional and caste-based movements in India, the power of a central government which is perceived to be dominated by north Indian interests. This critique of nation building supports Dravidian regionalism, and continues to inform the way women are positioned to participate in the movement.

Periyar narratives do permit women to reflect on the significance of caste in their identity formation and in marking their bodies as inferior. Yet, the focus of Periyar feminism on a simplified, pan-Indian schema based on the four *Varna* belies the complex hierarchies that exist within Tamil Nadu (cf. Dirks, 1996; 281-284; Gupta, 2000) and the way women position themselves in this process. This is exemplified in the metaphor of caste difference that underpins Pineapples and Oranges, the activity that introduced this paper. The focus of Pineapples and Oranges on women's subordination in Hinduism and Brahmin dominance offers a partial analysis for understanding the experience of some women.

However, differences between non-Brahmin Tamil women are not addressed as evidenced in Pineapples and Oranges, by the absence of Christian, Moslem and *Dalit* women from the game, and by the undercutting of class relations as a source of gender exploitation. Students and teachers are *distinct* from other Tamil women in terms of class relations, and economic and social status and opportunities. Staff and students are well educated and many, but not all students are expected or at least hope to work in the paid workforce before and after marriage. As teachers, they are privileged in relation to the *Dalit* and Backward caste servers and sweepers at the school as well as women from nearby villages who wait for "daily wages" in fields and in construction.

Differences between women are reflected in women's labour force participation rate in Tamil Nadu which has increased over the last 30 years, in both rural and urban areas, from 46.48% to 54% in 1993 in rural areas, and from 32.05% to 40.2% in 1993, in urban areas (Government of Tamil Nadu, 1997: 193-202). This includes an increase in their formal sector participation, from 14.6% in 1970 to 28.1% in 1996. This is higher than the All-India rate, although the socio-economic profile of Tamil Nadu suggests high rates of poverty and displays the highest composite index of urbanization (Savitri, 1994: 1850).

Periyar feminists challenge the persistence of caste structures and current gender relations, and intercaste marriage is encouraged. However, the relationship between caste and reproductive practices, including marriage, chastity and sexuality, are not formally addressed in public narratives. This is perhaps, because as Ram argues, reformist organizations seek to contain the effects of change which "might fundamentally destabilize the central figure of the chaste mother-wife" (Ram, 1995: 316). Control over women's sexuality and reproduction remains an important means of reproducing caste. A focus on these matters would test the reformist and critical edge of this social movement and potentially pit it against social forces that seek to protect caste difference in Tamil Nadu.

Some studies suggest that the uneven and accelerated urbanization and the upward mobility of lower caste groups in Tamil Nadu has generated a shift toward emulating north Indian practices, particularly of dowry, son preference and a decline in matri-lateral marriage ties (Kapadia, 1993; Basu, 1999). Moreover, women are currently bombarded with an array of contradictory, yet powerful discourses, ranging from scientific, psychological, and the persistence of Tamil classicism (Ram, 1995: 316). These mixed messages combine with the difficulties of juggling paid work with mothering and the expectations of the movement itself. The movement then, offers a very partial script on which women might act to effect change.

This does not mean that POWER members are unaware of these limitations. As one POWER member argued, in the absence of "alternative structures," effective protection and substantive access to legal rights in terms of property and divorce, it is difficult to imagine what living differently might look like, outside of caste and marriage. In fact, the discrepancy between women's approach to caste, and the anti-caste rhetoric of the movement is as I have suggested, related to the privileges these women gain from their participation in caste and the social and economic security it provides.

Yet, this privilege should be viewed in a context where women remain excluded from property ownership. It has been noted that women often relinquish property rights upon marriage in exchange for their dowries, even though the latter is officially illegal (Whitehead, Bannerji, Mojab, 2001: 13). The constraints this places on women was also reflected in an interview I conducted with a prominent lawyer and member of the DK. He argued that law in India and Tamil Nadu had significantly improved women's situation. Yet, he acknowledged that he handles many property and dowry disputes, some of them on behalf of wid-

ows (also see Agarwal, 1998), most of them initiated by married women who are seeking family property to which they are legally entitled. These disputes he claimed, however are rarely instituted by the woman herself, but often by her husband and his family.

At the same time, at the Polytechnic, a woman centred discourse is emergent in several ways including increased attention to violence against women in Tamil Nadu and through the development of a "women's studies" curriculum. Moreover, through exchanges Periyar feminists learn to develop workshops, as storytelling contexts. The workshop provided a social space for the emergence of critical perspectives that attends to the dilemmas and contradictions in women's lives. Feminist conscious raising strategies were both culturally specific and yet distinct from normative methods of addressing an audience through formal lecture and speeches. This allowed women to consider the complex dilemmas they face, to confront, affirm and negotiate their cultural identities and expose the limitations of the movement itself. It remains to be seen however, whether such workshops, performed in the confines of the movement and the walls of its school, will provide the alternate structures that are needed. The formation of POWER itself is one initiative that Periyar feminists argue might permit greater flexibility than the school setting can provide.

Yet, change is advocated as a slow, culturally sensitive process. This makes it crucial to track the way POWER, as an NGO, not just a women's organization, incorporates a wider range of women into its structure and development initiatives, a topic I address elsewhere, (George, 2002a). Periyar was considerably ambivalent about British rule, which he perceived to be a counterpoint to Brahmin dominance. He selectively embraced Westernization, as much in response to changes and difference within India, as to the place of India in a global context. In a similar vein, feminism, selectively deployed, may be a way in which the DK positions itself as reformist and critical towards Indian nation building and Tamil regionalism.

Feminism in Transnational Practice: Situating the Ethnographer

Visweswaran's (1997: 592-593) call for feminist anthropologists to assume a position of "disidentification" in their analysis of women's experience and gender relations is useful only if we draw upon it as a provisional starting point. Indeed, this orientation directed me to analytically parse my previous analysis of feminism and women's organization in Newfoundland from the

dynamics of feminism, gender and caste I observed in Tamil Nadu. At the same time, feminist anthropologists had already problematized the insider/outsider relationship to explore the dynamics of gender and cultural production and the negotiation of power as it is produced and encoded within and beyond the field (Enslin, 1994; George, 2000; Wolf, 1996). My participation in the workshops which I cannot detail here, broadened the field of conversation to include comparisons with women's lives in the West, a perspective that was also revealed above by POWER members', reflections on Newfoundland. The analysis this interactive dynamic conveys can be even more important if we connect it to the wider interdisciplinary field and the political context of doing anthropology in a global context.

Feminists writing outside of anthropology, argue, that although a reformist, "engaged" activism, may depoliticize social issues, they also point to the fact that our analysis of feminism and its impact should not pit those who work within the system against those who take a more confrontational approach (Miller and Razavi, 1998: 2-6). Rather, the focus should be on the articulation of these different actors, in contest and alliance, and on the "contested nature of rules and discursive practices/gender" (Prugle and Meyer, 1999: 5).

My exploration here, of different narrative contexts, is an attempt to capture, however partially, these complex dynamics where women are implicated in both feminism and a social movement that bears a legacy of nationalist mobilization, but which reproduces and may even support current expressions of caste and regional identity. And yet, by distinguishing different narrative contexts, discursive ruptures do appear in ways that bring to the surface a range of inequalities and dilemmas women experience. The absence of class relations from the picture of oppression, however, which is a more general trend in Tamil Nadu itself (Dickey, 2000: 464) necessitates a broader analytical scope.

By researching an organization that explicitly drew upon feminism, albeit selectively, I sought to avoid labeling it as feminist in advance and yet, perhaps reified the organization itself as a focus for study. It is only when I remove the boundary marker, "women's organization," from the analysis that I broaden even further the "social field" (Edelman, 2000: 310) to apprehend the complex ways in which women reproduce and challenge the inequalities and privileges in which they are embedded.

As an NGO, POWER assumes a different guise as a service provider, supporter and critic of government policy, and client of international donors whose funds bring its members to Canada. This widens the scope beyond

Tamil Nadu to a broader global context where development and international governing policies and social movement activism coalesce. This is an obvious insight on one level. Yet, it bears tracking in specific social settings, particularly in a climate where engagement and reform may in fact prevail as women's organizations expand in their scope, agenda, strategies and service provision (Miller and Razavi, 1998; Prugl and Meyer, 1999: 2-15). Anthropologists, drawing on a feminist practice approach are well positioned to occupy such spaces by providing a grounded analysis of discursive struggles and by tracing the movement of social actors, the anthropologist included, in alliances and networks (Edelman, 2000: 310-312; Fox and Stern, 1997: 9), that move beyond the boundaries of reformist organizations such as POWER.

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Notes

1 "Periyar feminism" is employed by female leaders of POWER, the women's organization, who have learned about and interpreted feminism through their involvement in various activities in Tamil Nadu, India and international fora, including exchanges in Canada. This research was funded by postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

2 "Backward" Castes is the term commonly used at the Polytechnic (see note 9).

3 For example, Stephens, 1997; essays in *Feminist Fields*, 1999; Barillas; Ertiz; Judd.

4 For this paper I refer to Ramasamy as he is known at the school, as "Periyar."

5 Studies that address tensions between women-centred issues, states and related social movements: for example, Guerrero, 1997; West, 1997; Basu, 1995; Trask, 1996; Anandhi, 1997; Ray, 1999; John, 2001; through case studies within anthropology, Stephens, 1997; Ertem, 1999; Judd, 1999.

6 This is an obvious point within feminist literature; see Narayan, 1997; Gedalof, 1999; Flew, 1999 for examples of more recent discussion, post Mohanty, 1991, in terms of social issues and exclusions in a transnational, postcolonial context; Prugle and Meyer, 1999 re: producing agency in a development context; anthropology, Stephens, 1997: 4-11 on feminist consciousness.

7 Another way for example, is through a transnational comparative perspective of specific gendered social issues; e.g. Panjabi, 1997; Narayan, 1997; 81-119.

8 Government of Tamil Nadu, *An Economic Appraisal*, 1996-7: 211.

9 Backward Castes represent a mix of lower- and middle-caste groups which were non-Brahmin, loosely classified as *Shudras* in the emerging, turn-of-the-century British classification system. These groups have increased from 11 groups in 1883 to 323, in 1988 (*Economic and Political Weekly*, March 10, 1990: 515).

10 The "myths of Manu" refers to the *Manusmriti*, a religio-legal text describing duties of different social groups. This text, particularly its attention to the conduct of Brahmins, the polluting nature of women and de-valuation of lower caste groups, formed a focus for interpreting the victimization of Non-Brahmins even in the earliest phase of the movement (Irschick, 1969: 46).

11 This paper focusses on these gender workshops with staff in particular, but supplementary insights derive from my participation in several other workshops and discussion groups with over 150 students aged 18 to 25 and from discussion groups in three villages which are not examined here. Also, structured interviews were conducted with 101 persons, 84 women and 17 men. Most of these persons were from the Backward caste category. A small sample consisted of Scheduled Caste persons, most of whom were Christian, and worked as sweepers and servers at the school, or as housekeepers. A few were Moslem.

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