

Review: Book Review

Reviewed Work(s): From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence against Women in India by Kalpana Kannibiran and Ritu Menon; Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India by Geetanjoli Gangoli; Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary by Veena Das

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From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence against Women in India. By Kalpana Kannibiran and Ritu Menon. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007.

Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India. By Geetanjoli Gangoli. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary. By Veena Das. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

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The Indian women's movement against violence has benefited not only from the minds and actions of academics, policy makers, writers, and street activists but also from its field of vision. Violence against women has become known not only as an attack on a woman's body or mind but also as an assault against her social or economic location. The politics and violence of caste relations and between religious adversaries have long been known to overlie and reinforce misogyny. This understanding of oppression on more than one dimension gives, in my view, to Indian feminism (including the struggle against violence) a depth and breadth that are intrinsically valuable and that also hold lessons for feminist thinking and activism elsewhere. The books under review here offer readers a broad overview of the history of the movement but also invite us into spaces and places that depict in horrendous detail the nature and meaning of harm and pain—not only for the subject but, to an extent, for the researcher as well.

Kalpana Kannibiran and Ritu Menon review the Indian women's movement against violence over a thirty-year span. They bring us right into key debates and enduring conundrums—including the feminist search for legal reform in a patriarchal legal/state apparatus; the politicization of religion and the communalization of the legal domain; the ever-closer relationship between feminist activists and the human rights world; the recognition of various forms of activism—in particular, activism in alliance with trade unionists, through performance art, and as mothers' organizations; and the impact of state violence on conceptualizations of violence against women. Activists rarely have the time to write of their work, and it falls to others, often academics, to undertake this role. *From Mathura to Manorama* presents an important documentation of approaches, strategies, and analyses from two experienced and thoughtful practitioner-thinkers.

The law has long been a site of struggle for feminists, where both hope and dismay find expression; this is certainly so in India. Kannibiran and Menon's account of the potential and felt impact of the international human rights framework on feminist struggle echoes journeys of feminists in other parts of the world who seek engagement with international law. The authors note the definition of violence against women in Recommendation 19 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The international framework and ways in which the meaning of key documents such as CEDAW has been progressively explored by the committee have been important in India in "prising open the private sphere to public scrutiny and public law in more effective ways" (44). This opening of the private sphere has been accelerated by civil society submissions, also known as shadow reports, and through the acknowledgment of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform by progressive court personnel in their deliberations. But no feminist journey is smooth or without backward steps, and some indicators of a patriarchal legal mind-set that Kannibiran and Menon note in India, and that inspire dismay, include the Law Commission's statement in its 2000 review of rape laws that the removal of the marital rape exemption would constitute an "unnecessary interference in the institution of the family."¹ Deep-seated notions of "rightful" male sexual access permeate society and the legal professions, and despite the nationalist fervor that has emerged in most professions in India, legal discourse remains curiously shaped by English Victorian values, including the problematic notion of (women's) modesty. The authors note the tension between dynamics that drive more liberal and pro-woman interpretations of law and legal practice, on the one hand, and the conservative and constraining expectations of women's behavior, on the other: "Deep-seated assumptions about women interrupt the discourse on anti-discrimination, shrinking the space of redress discursively, even as it seems to expand through statutory interpretation" (54).

Kannibiran and Menon prompt us to remember that human rights have a nonlegal or extralegal dimension, noting that the essence of human rights is a philosophical concept: dignity. Quoting the Vishaka judgment in relation to sexual harassment (and sexual assault) in or related to the workplace, the authors show a major shift from notions of womanly decorum, bashfulness, and decency to a rights- and equality-informed understanding that the workplace should be safe and that the "right to life

¹ 172nd report of the Law Commission of India, 2000, on the Review of Rape Laws (referred to in Kannibiran and Menon, 70).

means life with dignity” (49).² Here lies potential for both activists and academics in remembering the meaning of human rights, which is significant for women. With this decision, the possibility of the human rights framework having relevance beyond the realm of law becomes more real and more relevant.

For weary activists, the range of strategies explored in this book will provide creative energy. We learn and consider the usefulness of many approaches—from taking traditional men-only dance forms and using them for feminist messaging, to allying with trade unionists, to contesting sexual harassment, to rethinking the nature of gendered forms of struggle, such as mothers’ organizations.

In the final, solo-authored chapter, Menon recaps the vexing conundrum faced by all women’s movements for reform: whether and how to expect pro-woman actions from patriarchal state and legal systems. Clear on the limitations of such agendas, Menon nevertheless concludes that “neither state institutions nor judicial remedies can be dispensed with. Rather than dismantling state structures it might be more constructive to work towards removing the ‘Male’ in the state, even if this means recasting it entirely” (196). Unfortunately, what this means or looks like is not shown to us here. And readers unfamiliar with Indian references may find parts of the text difficult to follow.

Geetanjoli Gangoli also takes a broad view in her review of Indian feminisms, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, covering a vast range of cases, events, and issues. She takes this broad approach even though her focus has two key concerns: the impact and effectiveness of legal changes and interventions, and the relationship between Indian and Western feminisms. With a primary focus on the period from 1995 to 2005, Gangoli navigates some of the key debates that have dominated feminist agendas, showing debate, unanimity, and variety. A theme in this book is that of linkages. Gangoli points out the strong links between feminisms that claim autonomy (in India, this refers to a distance from the Left) and feminisms that are allied with left or other struggles. She also describes the importance of linkages between the feminist move-

² This case relates to the case of the female community worker who was employed by the government to combat child marriages in Rajasthan. She was gang-raped, by five upper-caste men, as “punishment” for her work. The 1997 Supreme Court judgment in this case made reference to articles in CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action that require states’ parties to ensure safe working environments for women, to rule on the recurring experience of sexual harassment in the workplace, and to hold the employer responsible for preventive and remedial measures.

ment and the independence movement, caste struggles, and contemporary concerns with the marginalization of tribal communities and the commodification of women's bodies engendered by globalization.

Hindu domination in some forms of feminist organizing, though not necessarily intentional, has had the effect of alienating Muslim feminists; low-caste or low-class activists have also at times felt out of place in the women's movement. At the same time, Gangoli illustrates, Muslim women's appeals to the state for protection of their rights and promotion of gender equality have fallen hostage to communalist dynamics, and Muslim women have too often been cast as tools in anti-Muslim politics. Muslim separatism has understandably been one response, with the growth of Muslim women's organizing. Yet surely this too enriches the movement.

Gangoli dips into parliamentary debates on issues of concern to or raised by the women's movements, debates that serve as stark reminders of the stranglehold of the deeply unyielding heterosexual patriarchy upon much of Indian public discourse. In turn, this sets the scale of the challenge for Indian feminists. Like Menon, Gangoli also tries to find her way through the difficulties of making feminist demands on a patriarchal state and legal system; like Menon she comes down in favor of the attempt.

In taking on the overly used critique of Indian (and all non-Western) feminists as being Westernized, Gangoli turns the question on its head and asks what Western feminism can learn from Indian experience and thinking. This is a fair response, and she gives some interesting examples—including linkages between various social agendas and facing up to violence by women—yet there is much more to be said about this.

Through her journey into the depths of suffering, Veena Das offers an exploration of the pain and the ways those who have known violence live, a philosophical exploration of the meaning of violence and of the author's own journey into those violent places. The title of her recent book, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, notes Das's interest in the language used, and sometimes avoided, in relating to experiences of violence: "A person can be seen as a victim of language—as if words could reveal more about us than we are aware of ourselves" (7). It also maps her journey and her theorizing about the relationship between agency and the ordinary: while violence disrupts or ruptures lives, life itself is "recovered . . . through a descent into the ordinary" (7), and therefore it is through a descent into the ordinary, rather than an escape from it, that agency is exercised.

India's history is inextricably one of pervasive violence. Das explores this in relation to the violence of partition (of India into India and Pakistan) and the violence that was meted out to Sikhs after the assassination

of Indira Gandhi. In particular, Das is interested in sexual violence in these communalized orgies of horror—the place of women’s bodies and sexual identities on the locus of collective identity and place. For those who are unfamiliar with these histories, this includes the violences of parading women naked in public, ripping open wombs to tear out fetuses, and women’s encouraging “their” men to rape the “others” women.

The philosophical analysis Das takes up draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell and presents her own particular take on the place and meaning of violence. Here she offers a philosophical as well as an anthropological text, giving a fascinating complement to the dominance of legal, sociological, or even economic analyses of violence in India, though her work will have relevance worldwide.

Das finds ways to allow her work (which draws on ethnography, philosophy, and theory) to sit alongside an ethics—a responsiveness to suffering—and in turn also brings in her personal journey into and out of pain and suffering. Here, she takes herself and therefore us into the ordinary, the everyday, which she asks us to know. By taking into her home people who were touched by the violence against Sikhs in 1984—and I find it of great interest that she reverses the anthropologist’s method of placing the observer in the context/home of the observed—she invites the suffering into her ordinary and everyday and places herself in a position to see that suffering as her everyday.

The wealth of analysis and detail in Das’s book cannot be captured in this brief review. The place of masculinity in India’s violence, the many ways in which women proclaim their suffering—including silence, the interaction between body and language to demonstrate their pain and loss, and the mapping of anti-Sikh violence in Delhi in 1984—make for a lot to digest. Through stories of particular women we are shown the significance of language, interconnectedness, the everyday, and loss and suffering to very good effect.

The mining and understanding of complexity is too often avoided in much work on violence, in preference for simplistic analyses of binaries and dualisms with respect to politics, religions, ethnicities, and sexes. Das’s deep involvement in the everyday of the events of 1984, in the subtleties and politics of relief and humanitarian work at that time, allows us to see the shifting and at times apparently contradictory or at least diverse positions and politics of each of these collectivities. This is valuable indeed; it not only enriches our theoretical understanding but also allows us—in the agenda of responding to suffering—to find spaces through which to challenge or heal ethnic or religious or other faultlines. Das also allows us to find other collectivities that seek a humane commonality where

suffering and pain are to be responded to by all: “The body of the anthropological text as that which refuses complicity with violence by opening itself to the pain of the other” (211).

Finally, Das reminds us of the enmeshing of the everyday, the ordinary, in the production of an ethical being thus: the words “everyday and life [point] to the eventfulness of the everyday and the attempt to forge oneself into an ethical subject within the scene of the ordinary” (218). There is much in this book that deserves the attention of those engaging with violence and violated lives, particularly its considered understanding and engagement with lives that live the everyday of violence. ■

Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities. By Laura E. Pérez. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Gender on the Borderlands: The Frontiers Reader. Edited by Antonia Castañeda. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

Relocating Identities in Latin American Cultures. Edited by Elizabeth Montes Garcés. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007.

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Without a doubt, the fields of Chicano/a and Latin American cultural studies constitute important sites of feminist scholarship. Within these disciplines, writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have permanently altered the terms of feminist subjectivity by positing mestiza consciousness as the ground of Chicana identity and calling on all of us to question capriciously arbitrated borders between “us” and “them.” While all three of the texts under review here advance the fields of Chicano/a and Latin American studies as scholarly projects, we are especially drawn to the political interventions, cultural activism, and grounded feminist analyses provided by Laura Pérez’s monograph and Antonia Castañeda’s edited collection.

We start with Pérez’s *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*. The first book-length study of Chicana art, this long-anticipated volume surpasses expectation in breadth, depth, and presentation and begins to fill a noticeable gap in feminist scholarship. We applaud Duke