

Sex and the Signal-free Corridor Towards a New Feminist Imaginary

LATA MANI

This article reflects on the idea of the city shared alike by feminism and neo-liberalism and its regrettable implications for how the question of women's sexual freedom is articulated and defended. It argues that feminist discourse is in need of being rethought and proposes that such rethinking will require taking critical distance from the neo-liberal paradigm and its notion of freedom, as also broadening the scope of feminism to address existential issues facing young women and men today.

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In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx writes that history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce.¹ But when farce repeats itself ad infinitum, what then? We revert, I submit, to tragedy. In this article, I would like to think about the regrettable entanglement of our discourse as feminists with the ruling paradigm of the present. Feminism conceives of itself as an oppositional force. In crucial ways it is. Society would be radically different if women were treated as equal to men and if all women were treated as equal to each other. So let us grant that at the very outset.

Idea of the City

The entanglement to which I would like to draw attention in light of the ongoing discussion of violence against women is the idea of the city (of urbanisation more broadly) shared alike by those who support neo-liberalism and those, including feminists, who are critical of it. This is the notion that urbanisation by its very nature signals increased

freedom for all individuals, but especially, for women. Liberating women from the traditional structures and strictures which have hemmed them in, urbanisation is seen to make possible new kinds of mobility, enabling access to a wider range of public spaces and ways of being.

There is much truth in this characterisation but, as we know, it is not the whole story. Women continue to be harassed, assaulted and disciplined in cities. Indeed, the very idea of the city as the space of "freedom" sets the stage for making city women vulnerable to sexual violence. Several notions converge to facilitate this being the case. First the modern sense of freedom is closely tied to the idea of individual self-determination, and given the centrality conferred on sexuality to the notion of self in modernity, to individual *sexual* self-determination. That said, sex continues to retain the taint of the illicit and risqué, either explicitly as in the rhetoric of social conservatives, or else, implicitly as in the assumed radicalism of sexual permissiveness (after all why would an integral aspect of humanness be considered "radical" unless still shadowed by the sense of impropriety). As I have argued elsewhere, both sides conceive of sex as irrepressible.² For conservatives this makes disciplining sex crucially necessary; for those who consider themselves to be

sexually progressive, ridiculous and doomed to fail.

Sexuality-Freedom-Pleasure-Danger Nexus

For our present purposes what is important to note is that the sexuality-freedom-pleasure-danger nexus is part and parcel of the modern construct of the city. This is why freedom in the context of city life connotes pleasure as well as danger. When freedom is understood in this way, in a patriarchal context, men's freedom virtually assures women's vulnerability. These linkages and ideas are the staple of popular culture, advertising, etc, and frame women's experience of city life.

It will be noted that what I have said thus far equally describes women's experience of the Indian city in the 1980s. Is the present, then, merely repeating history as farce or is there something that distinguishes it? Put another way, is there something specifically neo-liberal going on in the present time?

The city is a crucial site for neo-liberalism: not just for its political economy – investments, markets, etc – but for its symbolic economy. It is the staging ground for neo-liberalism's imagined future. Raw materials may be extracted from the rural interior, but it is upon the city that neo-liberalism unleashes its fantasies of chrome and glass buildings, unhindered vehicular mobility, corporatised urban governance and lifestyles yoked at one end to work and hyper-consumption and at the other to work and immiseration. It is in the city that one most forcefully encounters the new nationalism of "free markets", consumerism as a means of combining personal gratification with contributing to economic growth, and aspiration as the glue that binds an unequal polity.

Neo-liberalism is not merely an economic force, but one with profound sociocultural consequences. It ushers in a new form of life. Urban areas are vital to this project not just in terms of their market potential, but in the creation of new subjectivities, especially among youth, the educated and professional classes. If this segment of society can be captured cognitively an ideological victory is assured. An economically harsh,

socially disruptive, ecologically disastrous set of policies can masquerade as liberation from the economic and sociocultural restrictions of the past, and relatedly, as heralding a desirable future. It is here that the idea of personal freedom gathers specific charge and content. "Freedom" comes to be represented by the young, desiring, unfettered subject able to choose his or her path, partner and forms of consumption, constrained neither by tradition nor any other material factor. Unrestrained choice and obstacle-free mobility comes to be woven into the very ideal of freedom.

Power of Ideal

The power of an ideal does not lie in the degree to which it is achievable but in the way it shapes a particular imagination of the world and a specific disposition towards it. In this regard we may note how this definition asks us to embrace the impossible. Unrestrained choice would require the absence of any context, any personal, social or material limits and the ability to control our environment. But we live in an interdependent world with finite resources, in obdurate sociocultural contexts that we are compelled to negotiate at every turn, and within a matrix of possibilities shaped by these constraints as well as our personal inclinations, strengths and weaknesses. The neo-liberal ideal requires us to treat as immaterial the world in which we live and the actual basis upon which we craft our lives. It would have us believe that we can remake ourselves and our surroundings according to our desires, just as it strives to remake societies and economies in accordance with the profit motive. Unrealisable though it may be this fantasy domesticates the logic of the market, the driving force of neo-liberal ideology. It enhances the desirability of money which is crucial to maximising opportunity and minimising constraint. It valorises control over self and environment and attributes value to the ability to muster such power. Most significantly, it serves to detach the individual from his or her physical environment, to configure desire around an abstract notion of who, what and where we are and could be. This inclines

us towards creating and inhabiting self-contained universes, customised auditory and social worlds of our own making. The working classes are able to achieve this to some degree with cell phones and music heard through headphones, while those with resources can more easily insulate themselves with smart phones, Ipods, air-conditioned cars and gated communities.

The cut and thrust, discomfort and challenge of collective life begin to feel like an intrusion into the space of a freedom increasingly envisaged in personal and individual terms. The signal-free corridor indifferent to the multiple, criss-crossing currents of human and vehicular traffic is a spatialisation of this tendency; the startling absence of awareness of one's environment evident today among many urban youth regardless of class position, and the greater evidence of rebellion by youth of all social classes against curbs on personal freedom and choice are examples of its impact on subjectivity. This ideological conjunction compels us to urgently rethink the grounds of our interventions whether in making cities safe for women or defending young women and men under attack by vigilante groups.

Body, Desire and Sexuality

As a very first step we need to rethink the binary way in which we have tended to pose the problem: as a conflict between an aggrieved feudal patriarchy violently defending its prerogative to control women and youth, and a liberating modernity which allows both the possibility of discovering themselves as individuals. This was the dominant response to the Mangalore pub attacks. However, this view insufficiently grasps the multidimensionality of our present

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circumstances. Neo-liberal ideology aggressively constructs the subjecthood of the modern individual as one in which sex, desire and consumption are thoroughly fused. In this context, we need to examine and disentangle the relations between body, desire and sexuality as they are imagined, experienced and lived by young women and men today. A key insight of feminist thought has been that gender and sexuality are not natural but social constructs. When we argue against vigilantism solely on the basis of a rights discourse we naturalise sexual desire. We imply that sex merely needs to be rescued from the repressive regime of a feudal patriarchy; that no inquiry is necessary as to how we have come to understand and experience it today. We fail to confront neo-liberalism's valorisation of sex and sexual desire and the implications of this for the relationship of women and men to their bodies, sexuality and sexual health.

Commodification of Sex

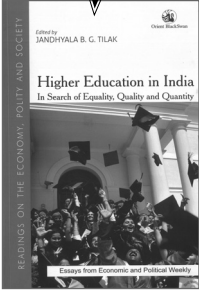
The present context calls on us to develop an analysis that can attend equally to how the feudal/traditional and the modern/

neo-liberal function as disciplinary vectors. After all the pressure to be sexually active is as much of an imposition as the requirement that we be discrete, mannered, perhaps a little ashamed of our desires, and treat heterosexual sex as fundamentally tied to reproduction within monogamy. In practical terms, this might translate into workshops on sex and sex education for women and men as key to any effort to make the city safe. Self-knowledge is as, if not more, important as knowledge of laws and rights.

The commodification of sex and of human relations more generally has meant that sex has become performative in a way different from the past. Today it is an aspect of one's public identity. Not surprising then that there are so many instances of sexual encounters being filmed and shared whether in order to show off, embarrass, humiliate or blackmail. Any intervention that does not critically engage this new landscape is bound to be, at best, partial and off the mark. At worst, it unwittingly affirms a cynical construct of human life that serves the interests of global and domestic capital.

We have acted as if we can reject the economics of capitalist modernity while welcoming the way it loosens the social and familial structures that have constrained us. But the two are intimately tied and we are required to confront the contradiction and imagine another way forward. Politics is the struggle for a form of life that is ethical, fulfilling and sustainable. The processes of objectification intrinsic to consumerism have deeply distorted our relationships to self, other, environment. One way to challenge commodity culture (and it is a culture) is to thoroughly inhabit ourselves – body, mind and heart – becoming fully aware of who we are; equally of where we are. This would deprive prevailing abstractions of their potency. For their power is secured by our distractedness, by our inattention to the rich complexity and sensuousness of our lives and of the world around us. This is as true of the so-called “cultural” and “religious” abstractions beloved on the Right as of those that have become so normative as to seem “universal” and empty of culture, like “money”, “sex”, “desire”, “freedom”. To be aware of ourselves, of our locatedness

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India has a large network of universities and colleges with a massive geographical reach and the facilities for higher education have been expanding rapidly in recent years. The story of higher education in India has seen many challenges over the decades and has not been without its share of problems, the most serious being a very high degree of inequity. Drawn from writings spanning almost four decades in the EPW, the articles in this volume discuss, among other things, issues of inclusiveness, the impact of reservation, problems of mediocrity, shortage of funds, dwindling numbers of faculty, and unemployment of the educated young.

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in time and space, is to embrace our embodiment in a way that would be discomfiting to the Right. It also makes us less vulnerable to neo-liberal bewitchment which after all also requires us to inhabit a fantasy world that only partially relates to the one in which we live and is, even then, at odds with it.

Framework Feminism

As a framework feminism is richly positioned to address the contradictory effects of neo-liberalism not just for women, but for society as a whole. Feminist scholarship has already advanced such an argument in relation to the colonial period arguing that during this time patriarchy was reconstellated, an idea applicable to the present. Equally relevant are the following feminist ideas: the objectification and commodification of women, the problematic nature of choice and the ensuing complexity of agency, culture as a contested terrain, a non-absolutist notion of resistance that accommodates negotiation, ambivalence and even complicity. Women's empowerment has generally been understood as unfolding within fluid relations and requiring more than gender to be recast in the process.

How might we understand the failure of the women's movement to adequately address certain aspects of present predicaments? Is it a legacy of the fact that the activist wing of the movement has primarily functioned in an anti-state mode with a focus on demanding changes in law, given which cultural work has been a subsidiary, issue-specific enterprise? Does such a strategy become less effective in context of neo-liberalism's mass media machinery, especially given that it is accompanied by a shrinking of the public space available for opposing perspectives? To what extent is feminist critique disarmed by a belief in the historical necessity of industrial modernity, of which neo-liberal globalisation is a contemporary avatar? Taken together, do these factors make the women's movement more likely to address economic, political and legal issues in ways that fail to simultaneously engage existential questions posed by the seismic cultural dislocations of the

past two decades (leaving the field open to their distortion and exploitation by the Right)?

Whatever the reasons, in not taking up the strains and confusions that many young people confront in the pressure to be sexually liberated, frequently inebriated, "fully-loaded", economically successful individuals, we make feminism irrelevant to a class fraction that could benefit from its insights. In responding primarily in the language of "rights", we bracket vital issues signalled in the alienation felt by those excluded from this new elite, whether on account of their social, cultural, class, caste or linguistic background. Feminism's strategy means that it has little to say to those (regardless of background) whose personal inclinations make them disinterested or dissatisfied with the aspirations and forms of belonging currently in vogue. Can we rethink our imaginary so as to explicitly confront these dimensions of women's and men's experience? Can we oppose violence against women in public places without implicitly anchoring it in a notion of untrammelled freedom, an unrealistic presumption with little historical precedent? Is freedom only to be understood as the absence of constraint? If so, how does the feminist conception differ from the delusory logic of capital? The interdependent conditions of human existence make impossible the negation of all constraint. We would readily agree that cultural and material factors condition and temper women's relationship to social phenomena and institutions. Indeed, it is in recognition of this that we argue, for example, in favour of specific legal safeguards for women. Yet at other times our discourse can manifest a seemingly absolutist notion of freedom.

Conclusions

Several questions flow from an unequivocal embrace of the reality of interdependence. Among them are the following: What kinds of constraints are integral to our interdependence and inter-relationality and thus in need of being woven into our conception of freedom and choice? And what can we deem

as extraneous to this fact and simply evidence of the exercise of power deemed socially or culturally legitimate? How does an acceptance of limits remake our understanding of responsibility and response-ability? At the moment the onus for both is variously distributed between individuals, law enforcement and "society".

Deepening the movement's engagement with ethical and existential concerns widens its frame. We can defend the right of women to frequent pubs even while raising questions about the deleterious personal, familial and social consequences of associating alcohol consumption with relaxation, freedom, choice and social approval. Likewise, the assault of young couples in public and private spaces can be challenged even while pointing out that romantic love is a social construct and that such relationships are not always chosen freely. The way is also paved for a fresh reconsideration of sex and sexuality, two domains that have accrued particular significance in the present. Moving beyond relief at the decoupling of sex from reproduction and the pluralisation of genders and sexualities, we can posit sex and sexuality as organic to human life without requiring both to be inexhaustible sources of self-expression, pleasure and identity, unrealistic burdens which bring sorrow, perplexity and self-doubt to many youth today.

Such a reorientation is integral to a conception of politics as the struggle for an alternate form of life. Feminism's relevance to the present does not need belabouring. But its discourse needs to be rethought. At its core this endeavour would involve taking critical distance from the norms of the ruling paradigm. For these require us to subscribe to ideas that are distortive, not merely in their understanding but in their consequences for our lives.

NOTES

- 1 To be precise, in the first sentence of this essay, Marx building on Hegel wrote of historical personages not of history, though it is in terms of the latter that his remark is most often recalled. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852.
- 2 Lata Mani, "Sex" in *The Integral Nature of Things: Object Lessons from the Present*, Routledge, 2013, 101-08.