

# South Asian Feminist Declaration - Bangalore 1989

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We come from different countries in South Asia - Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Divided by geopolitical boundaries, we are all bound together by a common South Asian identity. This identity expresses itself both in the linkages we have with each other and in the struggles each of us is involved in within the women's movement in our respective countries.

These links have strengthened us individually and have led to a growing sense of regional solidarity. Today, in the context of the contemporary socio-political environment, we feel it is imperative to develop and further strengthen a South Asian perspective for women's liberation in the region. This declaration is an expression of our personal/political commitment to a broad based South Asian feminist platform and a call for support to strengthen such a platform.

Our countries, although far from being homogenous, having different social, and economic conditions, share great similarities. The South Asian region has been a mosaic, a pentimento through which layers of history have been created through alignments and realignments as people moved from one part of the region to another, mixing, mingling and internalising different cultures. These alignments and movements were ones of conflict as well as of collaboration; whatever their specific history, these migrations created corresponding structures of kinship, caste and community within each region. Each country today is internally constructed by these structures. Each mirrors the other in richness and diversity of religions, cultures and social institutions.

The way we eat, dress, build our homes, the songs we sing, the pictures we paint are all of a common mode, shaped more by local environments (cultural and ecological) than by political boundaries.

Who we are today is as much a product of a common heritage of the legacy of colonialism and the struggle of earlier generations to create a just and equal society in the region. In the post independence period however, we have continued to be subject to common structure of oppression and exploitation imposed by dominant class/caste and patriarchal rule, reinforced by almost identical government responses to the legitimate aspirations of people.

As women our lives are subject to control through predominantly patriarchal structures and family laws and institutions, often justified on the basis of religion. The onslaught of capitalism and imperialism in the post independence period, has led to increasing restrictions on our space and access to resources, and a destruction of our traditional skills and knowledge systems.

Along with other marginalised communities we have been subject to increasing levels of state, community and family violence. Our voices are not heard as we are excluded from the political process which projects class privileged dynastic rule, whether by men or women leaders. The disintegration of civil society; the increasing centralization of authority in the hands of the state, often backed with fundamentalist sanction leaves us vulnerable to constant attack inside and outside our homes. Growing statistics on rape, dowry deaths, incidents of acid throwing, the stripping of women as acts of revenge, the concerted attack by religious fundamentalists to keep us propertyless

and resourceless, the continued denial of our contribution to subsistence, production and reproduction, are shared experiences of an orchestrated campaign to keep us forever silent, invisible and subhuman.

These similarities of experience (and internal diversities) are however denied by the centralizing and homogenizing actions of the state in each country. Some countries in the region project a monolithic Islamic or Hindu nation, often defined in opposition to their neighbours. Pakistan and Bangladesh are now Islamic states, Sri Lanka is virtually a Sinhala Buddhist State and India is being increasingly identified as a Hindu state. Relations between the countries are determined by national security interests. India and Pakistan have had 3 wars and numerous border clashes in the last 43 years. Periodically there are hostile exchanges, and on each side the flames of false patriotism, xenophobia and chauvinism are aroused. Such an imagery feeds into traumatic memories of partition and resurrects the fears of either hindu or muslim domination, further widening the gulf between the two countries.

Indian ships police the waters of the Indian Ocean and the presence of Tamils across the sea in Tamilnadu, has led to fears about "Indian imperialism", being whipped up among the Sinhala people. As a result the Tamils in the North and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka and the Tamil plantation workers imported by colonialism are viewed as the Indian fifth column. Although Indian intervention in Sri Lanka was requested by militant groups and supported by democratic forces in Sri Lanka, the record of the atrocities by the IPKF has raised serious questions about India's geopolitical interests in the region.

The neighbouring country is the main enemy or the cause for internal tensions we are told. Although there is some opening up, it is still difficult to cross borders to meet friends or colleagues, to visit familial villages or read each others books and papers. Today barbed wire fences are being erected between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, while Sri Lankans are said to disappear in green boats in the seas controlled by the Indian navy.

When we reach out in support of other women fighting against patriarchal and state violence in the region we are labelled anti-national. Activists and intellectuals who take a democratic stand in Sri Lanka are branded as traitors to the Sinhala nation. Support for women in Pakistan and Bangladesh, in their fight against religious fundamentalism by the women's movement in India is seen as a Hindu reaction and these organisations are seen as Indian agent. Conversely, when organisations in India have highlighted the protofascist tendencies of hindu fundamentalists and raised the issue of attacks against minority communities, they are suspected of being Pakistani agents and betrayers of "national interests".

The notion of "national interests" becomes a ready rationale for governments in our countries to increase their level of militarisation. National and religious chauvinism built on mutual hostility becomes the binding force to maintain the nation state. It becomes possible, even commendable to kill, humiliate, maim and threaten the citizens of another country, religious or ethnic group or nationality in the name of preserving the unity of one's own country. Justified on the grounds of external defence, the armies are used more often for internal suppression rather than against each other. Rightful citizens are suddenly treated as enemy agents.

A declining proportion of yearly budgets are being allocated to health and education while there are massive increases in defence spending. Since the 1980's defence expenditure has escalated phenomenally in all the countries of the region. In addition, military assistance in the form of weapons and training have been provided for instance by the U.S. and Israel to the Sri Lankan government. The diversion of resources for military spending results in unproductive consumption of energy and non-energy materials and the diversion of labor and industrial production from socially

useful production. The existence of a manufacturing base for armament production in India creates a demand for more and more wars and lays the material basis for Indian dominance in the region. In the 1980's India's defence expenditure shot up from Rs. 4,329 crore in 1981-82 to Rs. 14,500 crore in 1989-90.

The militarisation of our societies has made brutalisation a way of life. War toys, daily violence in films and on the television have created a militarized culture. For women this means a sanctioning of and an increase in violence within the home and by the "uniformed guardians of the state". The disruption of "normal life" in military situations adds additional burdens and dangers to women's continuing responsibility for subsistence and household provisioning.

Each shaky regime is seeking legitimacy though projecting military power as a symbol of independent strength, prowess and national virility. The acquisition of arms from the superpowers has led to the creation of an interest lobby of influential political, military and bureaucratic groups who would push for higher and higher defence expenditures.

The most significant threat is that of nuclearisation. The use of nuclear energy only for peaceful purposes is denied by the fact that each country uses the threat of the "other sides bomb" as a justification to have its own bomb for national security. The global nuclear arms race and its horrific capacity to eliminate life on earth has shown that nuclear weapons are instruments of mass annihilation and cannot ever lead to security. The subcontinent particularly lies under the threat of a mushroom cloud. Statements issued by the Indian and Pakistani governments to not attack each others nuclear installations do not rule out the nuclear option.

The increasing crisis of legitimacy facing our governments today is rooted in the conditions of the birth of these separate nations, and the inherently divisive nature of the nation state itself. The colonial policy of divide and rule led to the political bifurcation of the subcontinent into two mutually hostile states of India and Pakistan. In Pakistan, Punjabi domination rested on the suppression of other nationalities and the process of Islamisation attempted to impose a homogeneity that suppressed other Islamic minority sects and created two classes of citizens - muslims on one side and non-muslims and women on the other side. Further intensification of ethnic and sectarian conflict has now led to the situation where Muhajirs are also demanding recognition as a separate nationality. In Sri Lanka, the control of state power by a Sinhala majority together with the projection of a Sinhala Buddhist identity led to the demand for a separate homeland by the Tamils. Today the violence and bloodshed continues and further divisions are being created on a religious basis.

In Bangladesh by the late seventies, the tensions between the Bengalis and the tribal population intensified as a reaction to the state's attempt to colonise tribal areas along with the use of constitutional/extra constitutional measures to contain tribal demands. The projection of Islam as a state religion, backed by foreign powers, has become a strategy to contain the economic and political crisis in the country.

In India, regional tensions have extended to communal conflicts between hindus and muslims, hindus and sikhs, with caste conflicts also being transformed into communal tensions. Caste conflicts and attacks on dalits have been heightened by the onslaught of capitalist development, the manipulation of political parties and the intervention of hindu fundamentalists. Indian secularism has contained the seeds of communalism which are now being aggressively articulated by the Hindu majority in their equation of nationalism with a Hindu state.

The state in our countries is chauvinist, authoritarian, militaristic and patriarchal. Historical evidence from the earliest times indicates that the very institution of the state was not only class

defined but also based on patriarchal authority right from the onset and the contradictions of patriarchy and class have been further developed by capitalism and imperialism. Anti-colonial nationalism incorporated particular notions of womanhood and manhood which ideologically circumscribed the proper roles of women within the limits of social work and domesticity. The maintenance of separate personal laws by post colonial South Asian states reflects their patriarchal bias, since all these reinforce the patrilineal, patrilocal family. Equal rights legislation remains unimplemented whether it concerns equal right to property or wages.

The homogenising and centralizing thrust of the state in our region is an expression of the spread, albeit unevenly, of capitalism. Although there are differences in the specific constellation of dominant classes, and the degree of dependence or independence from foreign capital between our countries, development programmes for agricultural and industrial growth have resulted in the appropriation of resources by a dominant class/caste group and increasing impoverishment of large sections of working people. Due to an energy and resource intensive strategy of development, our region, like others in Africa and Latin America, is in the throes of a severe ecological crisis. Water and land have been poisoned and polluted. Forests have been destroyed and river systems have been disrupted with dams. Waterlogging and salinity have turned vast tracts of fertile land into deserts.

Women, adivasis, dalits and small peasants have been the most debilitated in this process. Women now work longer hours than before, seeking fodder and fuel to maintain increasingly impoverished families. The acceleration of the twin processes of privatization and commercialisation, exacerbated in our regions due to varied combinations of capitalism with feudalism, has had very specific effects on women, particularly poor rural women. The provisioning of families has shifted even more onto the bodies of women as the number of female headed households increase in the countryside. More women are being drawn into wage work in the invisible, irregular and low paid sectors of the economy. New avenues of employment in the world market factories has instituted another form of exploitation as women are barricaded into restricted industrial production zones subject to patriarchal control within and outside the factory. IMF conditionality and structural adjustment programmes intensify these processes, particularly with the withdrawal of already scanty social and welfare services.

Although the processes of capitalist development have led to certain changes in the traditional structures of patriarchy, especially within the family, women are still subject to violent forms of control by the family, community, village and the state, as they begin to enter male space. Not only is women's labor and mobility regulated but the state in our countries is adopting more and more sophisticated and dangerous techniques to control women's fertility.

Over the past decades strong social movements have emerged in our countries, resisting and struggling against these manifestations of class and patriarchal rule. One of the most important movements of challenge and resistance to the various systems of exploitation and oppression that exist in South Asia, has been the women's movement. At both material and ideological levels feminists of the region have been active in challenging the authoritarianism and violence of the state, its repressive laws, fundamentalist tendencies, militarism and chauvinism: they have challenged the economic exploitation of workers and peasants, social oppression through the use of religion, culture and the cast system as well as discrimination based on ethnicity, language, caste or religious allegiance. They have also highlighted the use of violence against women within the family and in the workplace. In recent years they have raised the issue of human rights violations. Apart from such challenges feminists have also been involved in resistance to all forms of patriarchy, a resistance that has historic roots but also been sharpened in recent decades.

However, feminists have been called western, bourgeois, anti men, at various times. We have watched with amazement and often a feeling of regret at the strange alliance of the bourgeois

controlled press, right wing fundamentalists and sections of the progressive forces in our countries as they mocked, ridiculed and attacked the assertions of women's autonomy from capitalist/patriarchal controls. We see this labelling as a deliberate blindness and refusal to acknowledge the issues which have been taken up by the feminist movement in our countries. These issues have ranged from confronting the government on the withdrawal of equal rights for women, confronting dominant class/caste and patriarchal forces when they have suppressed, attacked and raped us for demanding our rights to land, wages or simply a job, to raising questions about the link between development models based on ecological destruction and violence against women within and outside the home.

More importantly, such labelling is a denial of our history within the region - a history which is rich with the stories of many women and men who struggled for democratic rights for women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a denial of the contributions of the masses of women in national movements and in peasant and working class struggles who raised both class and gender issues, who struggled and fought within wider political movements and within their families for recognition as equal human beings.

"In the 1980's we see feminism as an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological level, over women's labour, fertility and sexuality, within the family, at the workplace and in society in general; committed to conscious action to transform society.

The feminist struggle is guided by a vision of a society where people can live free of class, caste and state domination.

Although there are different tendencies within feminism, we locate ourselves within a broad tradition committed to democracy and socialism. In our actions and our ideas we combine a vision of socialism and feminism, seeing both as essential to a struggle against patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism.

We believe that feminism is the expression of women in struggle and is therefore a political movement and consciousness which will develop in practice as more and more women begin to join together against the structures which oppress and exploit them.

Feminism as a movement in South Asia has asserted the principle of autonomous organisation for women, while linking with broader movements at the same time. It rejects separatism and a narrow focus on individualism. It has opened the way to look at alternative ways of living, of building relationships, of an alternative decentralized economy and polity. It has struggled for dignity and for the humanization and democratisation of the family".

Linking together in concrete actions, formulating and campaigning for a joint charter of women's rights, sharing visions and developing alternatives to existing development models at the South Asian level from a feminist perspective would be an important contribution towards the overcoming of the tensions, distrust, and political, economic, social and cultural crisis affecting our countries today. We see this as one step in a broader process which would draw on and link together broader social movements, political organisations and progressive individuals who share this vision of transformation of both political and economic structures and relationships between people.

Bangalore, January 1989

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\* <http://www.sacw.net/Wmov/sasiafeministdecla.html>