SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

Pink, Polka-Dotted

Its early stridency mellowed, commoner voices now embody Indian feminism

PINK is the colour of my politics. And pink the colour of my bangles. Which is why I take issue with Sagarika Ghose's column (*My Favourite Pink Bangles*, September 3) that attempts to differentiate between the vanguard of the women's movement and its sindoor-clad proletariat. Her argument—that the freedom urban Indian women want these days is not to worry about women's rights—is interesting, but not compelling enough.

At a deeper level, Ghose's arguments are about how feminists have let their own causes down. But by differentiating empowered feminists from 'women of the base camp', as I call them—or those from the *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* school of thought, dress code and *tu tu main main* politics—this view denies agency to Indian women of the 'masses'. My argument is that while the big mommies who spearheaded the issues of women's rights have moved on, it is these very decked-up women who are living out the struggle for women's rights on a day-to-day level.

R. PRASAD

The leaders of the feminist movement—as Ghose rightly points out—have allowed themselves to be absorbed elsewhere. Not all may have succumbed to the complacency of the 'establishment', but they have certainly become inclusive, adaptive humanists instead of angry feminists who were getting everyone's goat. The Indian feminists of the Eighties realised too well that to be heard and accepted, they must stop beating the drum of difference. And find causes that mattered to everyone. Madhu Kishwar advocates the cause of the rickshaw puller as much as of disempowered women, while Vandana Shiva has moved on to make the green movement her calling card. Brinda Karat, Teesta Setalvad, Medha Patkar... the list is endless of women who have diversified their politics and addressed all the wretched of the earth, not just women. Those who stuck to their guns like Ranjana Kumari of *Brides Are Not For Burning* fame or poet Nabaneeta Dev Sen have little gunpowder left.

As power slips from the hands of the gin-drinkers, it's the *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* types who are taking over. And not so silently either. My opinion is informed by the hundreds of letters written to *Marie Claire* over the past 16 months. They have radically changed my views about what women want, and about who are the real footsoldiers of women's liberation in India. The yearning for freedom—individual, sexual and collective—is coming right from inside conservative Indian families, from inside the heads of sindoor-stained women. Karva chauth fasts sit cheek-by-jowl with toasting 'freedom' at a posh wine bar after the moon has been sighted. The daughter's right to wear the little black dress is encouraged, even protected by a fond mother, who perhaps lives out her fantasies through her daughter's boldness. She calls the police if she is harassed, joins a forum when asked to stand up against female foeticide, writes to agony aunts in women's magazines if her husband is 'insensitive', participates in sex surveys, giggling self-consciously even as she ticks the big 'O' questions.

Even with allowance for the 'lie factor' in sex surveys, where the math never really adds up, it is that sari-clad, cellulite-happy Kantaben who gives you the first-person confessional on what constitutes great sex inside traditional Indian families. I also take exception to the assertion that the pursuit of looking sexy takes away from a woman's freedom. In fact, desexualising the woman was the classic patriarchical power manipulation. In retaliation, looking sexy and revelling in it is a way to be free for many. Some do it obviously with glossy lipsticks and black halter tops, others like my Kantaben by wearing lacy bras, which may be for their eyes only, but it is freedom from the unsexy, enslaving Libertina versions of their mothers' days.

Disarmingly honest and guilt-free letters from women on their personal lives and fantasies tell the stories that are being played out by flesh-and-blood characters who, at the end of the day may never have their fill of *saas*, *bahu* and *saazish*. No, they don't join protest marches or participate in fiery TV debates. In fact, they are occasionally confused about how far to go and for what. But a new gene pool is emerging to take forward the women's movement. The older leaders have had their impact, but the baton has now been passed on to the Bablis of India, unlikely champions of meaningful rebellion. In some places the kitty party has taken the place of the women's rights seminar. It's a new club now, and membership is open to all. ◘

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