South Asian feminisms in Britain: Traversing gender, race, class and religion

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This article maps the trajectory of South Asian feminist struggles in Britain[1] and analyses the key issues that have shaped them. We begin by setting the context for the emergence of a distinctive South Asian feminist voice out of existing forms of self-organisation and resistance within minority communities and its location at the intersection of gender, race and class. We then move on to outline the nature and effects of four decades of activism, policy interventions and practice by South Asian feminist groups in Britain. We locate this activism within the context of government policy and statutory practice that has shifted from multiculturalism to multifaithism and highlight the implications for women's and girls' rights and the costs to secular feminist provision, particularly in relation to combatting violence against women and girls. Lastly, we also analyse how recent neo-liberal policies of austerity and shrinking welfare provision pose key ideological challenges for South Asian feminist organising.

1. Histories of migration and settlement in Britain: Early struggles on gender, race and class

In the UK, 'South Asian' is the commonly utilised term for people who originate from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. This is both on account of commonalities in socio-cultural contexts and a shared colonial and anti-colonial past, as well as the complex histories of migration that shape these diasporic communities, some of which predate decolonisation. However, while this term emphasises commonality—in response to the common 'othering' of people of South Asian origin in dominant discourses on race through the racist and derogatory term 'Paki' as well as to more recent attempts by Hindus and Sikhs to distance themselves from Muslims in the UK and reproduce communal identities—it is also important to recognise the heterogeneous nature of the South Asian diaspora in Britain.

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Though the South Asian presence in the UK can be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century (Visram 2002), our focus is on the significant phase of South Asian migration that began in the 1950s. Jat Sikhs came to dominate the Indian migration stream to the UK in the 1950s (Singh and Tatla 2006), though Punjabi migrants also included a sizeable minority of middle-and low-ranking castes. British passport-holders of Indian origin—a majority of whom can trace their origins to current-day Gujarat—settled in countries in East Africa (Twaddle 1990 160) faced declining economic opportunities and insecurity upon the adoption of 'Africanization' policies by the newly independent countries in the 1960s. Many made the choice or were forced to migrate to the UK as entire family units. The primary phase of Pakistani migration to the UK was from the late 1960s to early 1970s and was predominantly from Mirpur and Punjab while Bangladeshi migration began in the early 1970s from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, as people fled from the civil unrest in their homeland. Civil unrest also created the context for Tamil Sri Lankan migration from the 1980s onwards. Similar to all migrants and irrespective of their caste and previous occupational status, South Asian migrants found work in the lowest rungs of the employment hierarchy in unskilled manual jobs. During the 1960s anti-immigration sentiments mobilised by racist groups and Conservative MPs such as Cyril Osborne and Enoch Powell informed successive legislation restricting the entry and settlement rights of Commonwealth citizens between 1962 and 1971 (Brah 1996, 23).

It is against this history of migration and settlement that South Asian feminisms asserted women's rights to speak about domestic violence as part of a dialectical engagement with movements and groups focused on race and class and a co-terminus exchange with the mainstream white British feminist movement. South Asian feminist activism built on and challenged two streams of South Asian political organising in Britain—struggles that forged class solidarities through a focus on discrimination and exploitation at work, led by the Indian Workers Association (IWA) and black sections within trade unions and the Labour Party; and a more vociferous, irreverent anti-racist politics led by the Asian Youth Movements (AYM) that organised against racist violence and police brutality.

The IWA was originally founded as a welfare organisation for Indian migrants to England which provided support, guidance and advice on key areas such as housing, work and immigration rules and hosted a series of cultural events that acted as focal points for a South Asian sense of 'community'. The IWA's anti-colonial and secular framework cut through religious and caste lines as well as a pan-South Asian sense of postcolonial solidarity (through

links with the Pakistani Welfare Association) and informed subsequent anti-racist and feminist groups. However, IWA was formed of two tendencies—one that supported the Indian government at all times and another left leaning, communist strand informed by the Ghadar Party and willing to critique the Indian state. When the former decided to host Indira Gandhi's visit to the UK in spite of the Emergency, the IWA split into IWA-Southall and IWA-GB. Nonetheless, they both mobilised against discriminatory employers and exclusionary trade unions (Kalra 2017) and their community based self-organisation outside trade union structures was crucial in securing early victories for Indian workers as well as in the eventual recognition of issues of workplace racism and discrimination by British trade unions. Many branches of the IWA supported strikes led by Indian women against both white employers and Indian-owned textile factories that exploited women as cheap labour (Gill 2013: 561), often in the absence of mainstream trade union support (Anitha and Pearson 2018). However, the IWA membership and particularly the leadership predominantly comprised of Punjabi men and for a long time, they engaged with all issues involving South Asian women by reducing these to either class oppression or racism.

South Asian feminisms in Britain also built upon the history of grassroots organising by groups such as AYM, who adopted a new militancy in a political stance that was informed by a critique of colonialism and identification with the revolutionary politics of the USA-based Black Power movement. Many South Asian feminists also started out (some continued) with the political identification of themselves as 'black' in order to emphasise the shared colonial pasts and ongoing racist exclusions of Africans and Asians living in the UK. AYMs engaged in direct action (with the slogans 'Self Defence is No Offence'; 'Here to Stay, Here to Fight') to make demands of the British state as citizens, defend minority communities against Far Right mobilisations and daily racist violence as well as to highlight police harassment, immigration controls and other forms of institutional racism (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism/Southall Rights 1981; Campaign Against Racism & Fascism and Newham Monitoring Project 1991; Ramamurthy 2006). Championing secular politics, they rejected caste-, religion- and nation-specific identities based on subcontinental politics and they mobilised against conservative elements within South Asian communities across the UK. Alongside the intellectual development of anti-racist academia (centred around the Institute of Race Relations and the Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies), these groups were part of a rethink of the relationship between race and class as a move away from an economically deterministic Marxism. These debates and shifts also influenced prominent South Asian feminist activists

and academics in the UK. However, apart from Manchester AYM, many of these groups were dominated by men and their organisational culture was distinctly patriarchal (Gupta 2003; Ramamurthy 2006: 51-52; Southall Black Sisters 1990).

Issues of gender and race came together from the late 1970s in a series of the discriminatory immigration rules such as the 'virginity tests', primary purpose rule (PPR) and the one-year rule. Immigration rules meant that a woman coming to Britain to marry a fiancé did not need a visa if her wedding was to be held within three months, though spouses required a visa. Based on gendered and racialized conceptions about South Asian women (Smith and Marmo 2011), immigration officers at Heathrow airport would order a 'virginity test' to ascertain if a woman was already married, in measures which had a differential gendered impact (Wilson 2006: 76-85). The different framings of this practice signalled the ideological differences at play: IWA projected this as an example of the racist assumptions that lie behind immigration controls and utilised the discourse of 'honour' to condemn this practice while South Asian feminist activists talked explicitly about sexual assault, violation of women's bodily integrity, and highlighted the gendered impact of these racist immigration controls. These measures were subsequently abandoned in the face of widespread protests.

The primary purpose rule (PPR) and the one-year rule introduced a probationary period following migration during which a person had no recourse to public funds (NRPF), in a series of policies that were aimed at closing immigration routes into the UK through marriage migration (Sachdeva 1993). The PPR required applicants to prove that the main purpose of their marriage was not settlement in the UK. This requirement constructed genuine marriages in South Asian communities—which were often arranged marriages where the couple may not be able to demonstrate a prior relationship and knowledge of each other—as marriages of convenience, alleging that the primary purpose of such marriages was to facilitate entry to Britain for the foreign spouse (Menski 1999). Such restrictive immigration policies and practices became the target of extensive campaigns across the UK, such as the campaign for Anwar Ditta. Ditta was born in Birmingham but was sent to live with her father's family in Pakistan when her parents separated and eventually married and had three children there. She and her husband decided to return to England. They left their children in Pakistan while they found a house and work, intending to send for the children as soon as they were settled. On returning to Britain, Ditta and her husband remarried believing that their Islamic marriage would not be recognised under English law. In 1979, when they applied to bring their children

to the UK, their application was denied despite evidence including birth certificates for the children. Her cause was successfully taken up by anti-racist groups including the AYM, particularly its Manchester women's wing which took part in a range of anti-deportation and divided-family campaigns effecting women (Ramamurthy 2006).

2. South Asian Feminist organising on violence against women and girls

South Asian women's autonomous political organising emerged as part of Black feminist critique of white feminism, as well as in response to the neglect of gender within male dominated anti-racist and class-based politics. Anti-racist and class-based organisations such as the IWA and some branches of the AYM were notably silent, if not hostile, to conversations about violence against women. They considered any focus on domestic violence or women's rights within South Asian communities as fuelling the flames of racism and a matter that pertained to the private sphere, to be resolved within the family and community (see below for a discussion of how this was also a position supported by the British state). South Asian feminist responses were not homogeneous as is evident from the pieces within the iconic CCCS collection of essays—see Carby (1981) and Parmar (1981) who reflect on the problem with raising concerns about domestic violence in a context where the state and media outlets are pathologizing black families.

Nonetheless, South Asian feminist organising in Britain grew out of recognition of the intersecting inequalities faced by South Asian women whose experiences of disadvantage and discrimination in the public sphere intersected with their experiences of violence and subordination within the home. During 1975 and 1976, a group of women activists, social workers and anti-racist campaigners in London began meeting to share their concerns about South Asian women who wanted to escape domestic violence but felt that they had nowhere to go. Mirroring debates unfolding among black feminists in the US, they highlighted how survivors of domestic violence faced both exclusion and multiple barriers to mainstream services such as racism and lack of understanding of their specific needs related to particular forms of domestic violence (Larasi 2013) as well as patriarchal silencing from South Asian community and religious organisations (Gupta 2003; Southall Black Sisters 1990). They argued that access to black and minority ethnic (BME) women-only spaces were invaluable to women who may be simultaneously victimised by various forms of violence within and outside their homes, and that the option to escape domestic violence for a space where they may be

subject to racism by service providers or other survivors was unacceptable. These struggles pitted South Asian feminists against the British state, against dominant voices and organisations within their own community, as well as against white feminists who were reluctant to recognise difference and the impact of racism.

Southall Black Sisters (SBS) was founded in 1979 by African Caribbean and Asian women already engaged with the revolutionary politics of an emergent anti-racist movement and a thriving white feminist movement. They pushed for the right to women's autonomous organisation as an empowering way for minority women to do politics and to speak out on the violence within their homes. They challenged the sexism of the male-dominated spaces around them (for which they were derided) and, influenced by the history of feminist campaigns in the Indian sub-continent, they organised public demonstrations for justice for South Asian women killed by families and husbands within their local area. Importantly, these public demonstrations were led by South Asian women but welcomed majority ethnicities and men as part of a politics of solidarity rather than separatism (Gupta 2003).

The first specialist refuges for South Asian women in the UK, Asha Projects in South London and Saheli in Manchester, welcomed women and children in 1979 and 1980 and remain open today. Over the 1980s, there grew a network of specialist services for South Asian women in England, Wales and Scotland that primarily addressed issues of domestic violence. In keeping with feminist principles, organisations such as SBS and Asha Projects were initially established as collectives but a number of factors, including funding requirements, internal accountability and the practical need for more experienced workers to manage new staff, impelled them towards a more hierarchical staffing structure. The 1980s was also a period when South Asian feminists made alliances with other black feminist organisations in the UK such as Birmingham Black Sisters, OWAAD (Organisation of Women of African and Asian descent), Brixton Black women's group and Women Against Fundamentalism.

South Asian feminist activism also had a significant impact on broader feminist issues, as with the campaign for Kiranjit Ahluwalia. After suffering abuse and brutality for 10 years, she set fire to her husband Deepak in May 1989. Rejecting her plea of manslaughter, the jury found her guilty of murder, with the judge declaring that the violence she had suffered was "not serious". Kiranjit's plea failed because of the gendered construction of the defence of

provocation: it tended to benefit male defendants who are physically capable of reacting instantaneously when provoked, whereas women facing male violence may be constrained by men's greater physical strength and size. Due to the time that had elapsed between Deepak's last attack and her retaliation, Kiranjit's actions were construed as pre-meditated. SBS secured leave to appeal and the Court of Appeal accepted that the requirement and interpretation of a 'sudden and temporary loss of self-control' excluded the experiences of battered women. It recognised the notion of cumulative provocation and accepted that the time lapse between provocation and the fatal act could be seen as a 'boiling over' period rather than as a 'cooling-off' period. At the retrial in 1992 Kiranjit was found guilty of manslaughter due to diminished responsibility and sentenced to three years and four months (the time she had already served) and was released immediately.

By highlighting how the gendered framing of the legal subject disadvantaged women, this campaign led by SBS and supported by Justice for Women who advocated for a number of cases of 'battered women who kill' eventually led to a reform of the law of murder in England and Wales in 2010, when the requirement of 'suddenness' was removed. Unfortunately, the way that the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims is institutionalised, gendered and raced within the practice of the British criminal justice system meant that other cases of women who killed their abusive partners (such as Zoora Shah) did not gain as much empathy despite the campaigning efforts of South Asian feminist organisations (Patel 2003).

2.1 Violence against women and girls in minoritised communities: From invisibility to hypervisibility

South Asian feminist activism in Britain has challenged both dominant gendered norms within South Asian diasporas which scaffold violence against women and girls (VAWG) and challenged the British state to respond to this violence through protective and preventative mechanisms. Early feminist activism challenged the construction of domestic violence as intimate partner violence, which omitted other forms of VAWG, such as forced marriage and family violence by in-laws, from the frame of reference. Practitioners considered girls fleeing forced marriage as runaway children and routinely sent them back home to face further violence (Patel 1991; Siddiqui 2003) while academics talked about violence against South Asian girls as a symptom of a 'culture clash' (Brah 1996). Domestic violence service providers failed to recognise that in some South Asian families, in-laws may be the joint or sole

perpetrators of abuse. Violence by in-laws remains somewhat neglected as the broader assumption of male-on-female interpersonal violence informs much of the theorising and practice on domestic violence, particularly in the West.

Over the last three decades, feminist campaigns to raise awareness of these specific forms of VAWG have led to measures such as guidelines for statutory services on forced marriage, improved support for victims and survivors, and in 2004, the adoption of a cross-government definition of domestic violence that included forced marriage, honour-based violence and violence from family members and not just intimate partner violence.

However, in recent years—particularly since 9/11 and the mobilisation of a discourse of 'clash of civilisations' in Bush/Blair's so-called 'war on terror'—there has been a shift from invisibility to hypervisibility of VAWG in minority ethnic communities. The disabling paradigms which construct South Asian women as confined to the 'problematic private sphere' and the overwhelming emphasis on religion and culture as the basis of violence against minority ethnic women have been critiqued by post-colonial feminists (Narayan 1997). Within post-feminist discourses which posit that the battle for gender equality has been won in the West, any misogyny or VAWG is constructed as a remnant of the past or the pathological behaviour of some individuals that is unconnected to broader socio-cultural norms in the West. At the same time, VAWG within BME communities in the West and in other parts of the world is constructed as rooted in culture and as the real problem facing societies. It is within such discourses that conservative groups have articulated their opposition to teaching sex and relationships education (SRE/PSHE) in schools for all children as a means to combatting VAWG whilst they lend support to targeted violence-prevention education for BME communities within which VAWG is presumed to be the norm (Anitha and Gill 2015).

These intersecting issues posed by gender and race have, to some extent, created fissures among avowedly feminist groupings acting on behalf of South Asian women in Britain. Some feminist organisations such as SBS, Asian Women Unite/Freedom Without Fear Platform and Imkaan have been critical of this lens of essentialism whilst continuing to challenge VAWG, while others have embraced dominant essentialist constructions of this violence as a route to state action and resources. Government consultations on the criminalisation of forced marriage, which eventually came into force in 2014 in England and Wales, laid bare this divide. Groups like Karma Nirvana welcomed criminalisation, while groups including SBS and Imkaan argued

for a robust response to forced marriage through strengthening and implementing the existing package of protective responses to VAWG and for forced marriage to be considered a particular form of domestic violence rather than singled out.

2.2 Violence against women related to structural inequalities: State welfare and immigration policy

Compared to forms of VAWG that can be attributable to culture and are perceived as signifiers of difference, the British state has been far more reluctant to address manifestations of violence which are exacerbated and sustained by the intersection of gender with race, class and state policies.

One of the long-standing campaigns by South Asian feminists from mid 1990s was to highlight the impact of state immigration and welfare policies that effectively prevented migrant women from leaving abusive relationships (Joshi 2003). Marriage migrants were granted dependent visas which tied their residence and entitlement to welfare benefits with their marital status, thereby placing women in a position where being divorced or disowned by their husbands could mean deportation and separation from their children. This is one of the many ways in which the citizenship and residency regimes play a role in creating an imbalance between men and women who migrate, particularly as a family. Before 2002, marriage migrants to the UK who left their abusive husbands before they secured their independent immigration status were routinely deported to their country of origin, often to face further abuse from their families for not 'making the marriage work'. In 2002, in response to campaigns from South Asian feminist organisations, the Labour government passed the Domestic Violence Rule. These changes made it possible for a woman to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK if she could prove that her marriage had broken down because of domestic violence. However, women with insecure immigration status had no recourse to public funds (NRPF), which meant that they could not be accommodated in women's refuges. This rule left women destitute while they were expected to apply for ILR (Anitha 2011). Led by SBS, South Asian feminist groups such as Saheli, Imkaan and allied organisations including Amnesty International campaigned to change this, resulting in the Destitute Domestic Violence (DDV) Concession of 2010, which gives women limited access to benefits while they apply for expedited ILR. Many women, however, remain excluded as the DDV Concession only applies to those who entered the UK on a spousal visa.

Related to the issue of NRPF, the abandonment of wives in their home countries by their husbands who are UK residents has become a growing phenomenon whereby a marriage migrant within the probationary period of dependent visa is taken back deceptively to her country of origin and abandoned there with or without her children, while her husband returns to the UK and revokes her visa. Such abandonment commonly takes place within a context of other forms of violence, abuse and exploitation. Following abandonment, ex-parte divorce proceedings are often initiated by the husband, in a context where women are ignorant of the proceedings or cannot represent themselves in legal proceedings due to factors including financial constraints and denial of the requisite visa by the UK immigration service. This problem has been reported in the context of Indian-, Pakistani-, and Bangladeshi-origin men in the UK as well as other countries with histories of migration and of transnational marriages. Research on transnationally abandoned wives in India indicates that few abandoned women in India receive financial settlement, maintenance or return of their dowry (Anitha et al. 2018). The consequences of abandonment include severe social stigma, poverty and destitution.

Beyond the socio-cultural contexts which shape all forms of VAWG, it is the inadequacy of national and transnational legal mechanisms that make transnational brides a particularly vulnerable category of women who can be treated as disposable women, whose abuse is of no concern to the British state. Abusive men have been able to weaponise the UK government's determination to create a 'hostile environment' for immigrants in order to deny women their rights and to exacerbate their control over their wives (McVeigh 2018). South Asian feminist groups have recently begun campaigning on this issue and have gained some concessions within the family justice system, whereby transnational abandonment is now recognised as a form of domestic abuse. This will enable abandoned women who manage to return to the UK to access legal aid to fight for financial settlement upon divorce and reunion with their children.

These recent campaigns are part of a long history of mobilisation by South Asian feminist groups that have highlighted and challenged the differential gendered implications of what are often constructed as gender-neutral immigration controls. Despite gains made over the last two decades, there remains a long way to go to ensure that immigration control does not serve to deny women their human rights.

3. From multiculturalism to multifaithism: Resisting state policies and fundamentalist mobilisations

Culture and religion have become an inextricable part of conversations about South Asians in Britain including in relation to VAWG. This section will focus on how South Asian feminists developed criticisms of multiculturalism as state policy in the UK and, more recently, the transition from multiculturalism to multifaithism in the context of a neo-liberal retraction of the welfare state.

3.1 Multiculturalism as UK state policy

Multiculturalism refers to a postwar settlement between the state and Britain's ethnic minorities, established in 1966 by the then Home Secretary Roy Jenkins as a way to encourage cultural tolerance, to validate diversity in the context of assimilationist views that minorities have separate and distinct cultures and traditions that should be left at the border to integrate into the 'host' community. On the face of it, multiculturalism is an important state position and multicultural conviviality has been an important lived reality for minorities in the UK. However, in practice, multicultural governance became a means for the state to sidestep more difficult questions about direct racism, structural racism, power relations and socio-economic inequality in favour of exoticised displays of diversity (samosas, saris and steel bands) and shallow 'cultural awareness training' (Hall 2000). South Asian feminists argued that multiculturalism in practice is an undemocratic process that manages ethnic minority communities through a layer of 'community leaders', who are almost always male and conservative. In practice, multiculturalism resulted a tendency to homogenise minority communities which has resulted in the elision of power differentials based on gender, class, religion and caste within these communities.

Multiculturalist practice by state agencies has also had significant gendered implications. It has meant that minority women and girls receive a different response to VAWG either because practitioners misrecognise violence and abuse by assuming it is a cultural or religious tradition or because they assume that these issues need to be tackled by minority communities themselves and so refer women/girls back to families and community leaderships, who might have been involved in perpetrating abuse or entrapping women in abusive relationships. In effect, multiculturalism has been experienced as another form of racism when minority women and girls are not given access to the same services or national principles that are accepted for

majority women fleeing violence and abuse. For instance, engaging religious and community leaders for mediation purposes has often been seen as acceptable for minoritized women when state agencies otherwise accept that mediation is not a part of their role when it comes to assisting majority women fleeing violence and abuse. The most conservative sections of minority communities worked through multiculturalist practice to hold on to power over their communities by re-affirming culturalist and ethnicist arguments and promoting the same 'hands off' practice as professionals within statutory agencies.

As the Thatcher years waned and New Labour came to power in 1997, many South Asian feminists were hopeful of a new relationship with the British state as New Labour quickly embarked on inquiries into forms of VAWG within minority communities (e.g. forced marriage and female genital mutilation) and detrimental state policies (e.g. NRPF discussed above). Mike O Brien, a senior New Labour politician central to taking these issues forward, seemed to bolster the feminist critique of multiculturalism by calling for a 'mature multiculturalism' that did not give way to 'moral blindness' by viewing culture and religion as justifications for violence and abuse within minority communities (Siddiqui 2003). Moreover, forced marriage and honour-based violence were flagged as human rights abuses as a consequence of the South Asian feminist lobby, within a context where the Human Rights Act 1998 provided renewed currency for international human rights conventions that also recognised the role of the state in protecting women against violence by non-state actors and in the private sphere.

3.2 From multiculturalism to multifaithism
However, these advancements belied another important facet of the New Labour machinery that put in motion a slide from multiculturalism to multifaithism. Religious identities, religious groups and male religious leaders have always been central to the British state's relationship with ethnic minorities, a remnant of colonial systems of power. However, New Labour ushered in a new settlement that extended central state funding to religious organisations (including by exponentially increasing the number of state funded faith-based schools), created a new Faiths Sector, and included religious groups in negotiations about all forms of social policy even in those areas, such as violence against women, where they had no previous experience. For example, New Labour constituted a 'Working Group on Forced Marriage' which gave considerable weight to the voices of community and religious 'leaders' and its recommendations ultimately compromised the national standards set for tackling other forms of VAWG (Siddiqui 2003). This new settlement was the result of a dialectical interaction

between state policy and the ardent and sophisticated activities of conservative religious groupings and fundamentalist mobilisations from below. Transnational Hindu, Muslim and Sikh fundamentalist mobilisations had comfortably settled within local areas in the UK and, through multicultural governance, they had acquired legitimacy as part of a system of state patronage. However, this new settlement was not limited to minority religions, it also amplified the voice of mainstream and minority Christian formations and religious organisations of all hues. Multifaithism has also been linked to the value of communitarianism for neo-liberal conceptions of the welfare state where individuals are governed through and provided for by 'communities of allegiance' to enable a roll back of state provision. There has been significant continuity between New Labour and subsequent Conservative governments in the way that their commitment to communitarianism is about enabling a neo-liberal state and both parties continued to broker deals with religious organisations to neo liberal ends but only as and when this would not contest the state's monopoly on violence.

Religion has become a structuring principle for all manner of social policies including post 9/11 responses to fundamentalism (the Prevent programme[2]) and a wide range of social problems that were reconstructed as an issue of ethnic minority integration/segregation (Community Cohesion and later Integration policies). It has been argued that New Labour's response at the turn of the century marked a return to assimilationism (Back et al. 2002), but in actual fact multifaithism elevated religion as the main signifier of difference and amplified religious voices and sensitivities in policy consultations and allocation of state resources. One consequence of this privileging of religious identity under multifaithism has been the continued erasure of gender and caste hierarchies within minority communities. For example, despite the continuing salience of caste within the Indian diaspora in the UK, it is only over the past decade that caste discrimination has received any attention from the British state. Based on evidence about the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in the UK (Metcalf and Rolfe 2010), the UK government had decided to include caste under its Equality Act which bans discrimination on the basis of factors including gender, sexuality and race. South Asian feminist groups such as SBS, Imkaan and Freedom Without Fear Platform which mobilised for this recognition of caste-based discrimination were pitted against Hindu right groups which lobbied extensively to keep caste outside the purview of the Act. The final version of the Act did not ban caste-based discrimination in a step that was broadly seen as a concession to the Hindu religious groups. Despite these recent mobilisations, in comparison to the rich history of Dalit women's organising in India (Rege, 1998), the intersections of gender and

caste have been relatively less addressed by South Asian feminist organisations in Britain other than where they specifically relate to violence against women for marrying across caste hierarchies—in contrast to the its history of mobilising on inequalities and discrimination arising from gender, race and to a lesser extent, class.

3.3 Multifaithism and recent South Asian feminist mobilisations

We highlight three specific examples that demonstrate the implications of multifaithist practice on South Asian women and girls and the challenges to these developments posed by South Asian feminisms.

One of the earliest examples of the way in which multifaithist practice impacted secular feminist provision is from 2005 when the Mayor of London's Policy Advisor on Women's Issues invited religious leaders to a roundtable discussion on domestic violence. Long standing secular feminist organisations that had developed expertise in this area were not invited to the meeting. The event led to the publication of a report entitled *Praying for Peace* (GLA 2006) which encouraged partnerships between religious leaders and (feminist) domestic violence agencies (but without any space for a right of reply from those agencies) and, moreover, pushed the issue of violence against women into a framework of religious literacy, 'utilising religious notions of karma and sin' in place of 'feminist notions of human rights, choice and autonomy' (Dhaliwal and Patel 2012: 189).

The second example relates to South Asian feminist mobilisations against gender discrimination in faith schools. Two South Asian feminist organisations—Inspire and SBS—submitted evidence in a case against a school that that practiced gender segregation of its pupils. They argued that such segregation is the consequence of a fundamentalist lobby that seeks to reproduce views of women and girls as inferior, control female sexuality and sexual interactions, and seeks to limits girls' choices and confine them to the private sphere. In October 2017, the Court of Appeal ruled that a co-educational Muslim school had acted unlawfully by segregating boys and girls on the basis that the lack of interaction between the two limits the social development of both. This finding followed on from campaigns against Universities UK's support for gender segregation at University events and the Law Society's defence of 'shariah compliant' legal guidance on inheritance (Patel and Sahgal 2016).

These campaigns have demonstrated not only that the British state encapsulates contradictory tendencies but also that fundamentalist organisations remain important partners of the State and that fundamentalist discourse has gained legitimacy in a wide range of spaces, carried by multiculturalist tendencies that have institutionalised inequality and discrimination on the grounds of cultural and religious relativism. Moreover, recent UK governments have been keen to challenge Muslim fundamentalist formations while simultaneously influenced by Christian Right activists (see Dhaliwal 2017) and willing to turn a blind eye to the proliferation of religious fundamentalism among communities which are assumed to have 'integrated' economically—for example, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh school practices are subject to far less scrutiny than Muslim ones.

The third example relates to recent parliamentary debates on sex selective abortion (SSA). In the context of media reports which claimed that SSA was 'commonplace' among South Asian diasporas in the UK, anti-abortionist Conservative MP Fiona Bruce introduced a Private Members' Bill, Abortion (Sex-Selection) Bill 2014-15, which aimed to 'clarify the law' relating to abortion on the basis of sex-selection (Anitha and Gill 2018). Bruce and her supporters problematised SSA as one particular manifestation of a broader problem of VAWG in minority communities whereby, in a context of son-preference, South Asian women are coerced to terminate female foetuses. Parliament was presented with the prospect of protecting minority women's rights by supporting measures that would have resulted in greater scrutiny by doctors of minority women's abortion decisions (and therefore reproductive rights). The campaign against what was termed as 'gendercide' was led by right wing Christian organisations who garnered political space and legitimacy within the context of a national turn to communitarianism and a discourse about British values and cohesion which is underpinned by notions of Christian supremacy and anti-Muslim sentiment (Dhaliwal 2017). Their instrumentalisation of women's rights in their war on abortion received support from some self-proclaimed pro-choice and feminist South Asian women's groups such as Karma Nirvana and Jeena International.

There was only one dissenting vote against Bruce's bill. The unexpected appeal of this argument for the parliamentarians can be explained through what feminist postcolonial critiques (Mohanty 1991; Narayan 1997) describe as an impulse to 'save brown women from brown men' in a re-run of the paternalistic feminism that informed the British colonial ban on *sati* in India (Mani 1999). It was also a consequence of a heightened Christian Right influence

on Conservative Party politics and their growing sophistication and multi-layered approach to identifying opportunities that can curtail reproductive rights (Dhaliwal 2017). Bruce's Bill framed a particular set of socio-economic and cultural contexts within minority communities as coercive, eliding a variety of other socio-economic, political and cultural constraints in both minority and majority communities within which all women make decisions to continue with or terminate pregnancies. This rhetoric of choice frames white women as free agents when making reproductive decisions and differentiates them from constrained British Asian counterparts. The arguments presented in support of the Bill help explain the cross-party support for it in a context where parliamentary debates on abortion had hitherto been sharply polarised in Britain (Anitha and Gill 2018).

Bruce subsequently proposed an amendment to Section 65, Part 5 of the Serious Crime Bill 2014, arguing that the 'New Clause 1' should state that 'Nothing in section 1 of the Abortion Act 1967 is to be interpreted as allowing a pregnancy to be terminated on the grounds of the sex of the unborn child'. A range of feminist, pro-choice and medical practitioners' associations mobilised to challenge this proposed amendment. Whilst recognising SSA as a form of VAWG, SBS argued that rather than focusing on services that might support women to exit violent relationships or empower them to exercise meaningful choices in their lives, Bruce's amendment represented yet another instance of the government's 'resource neutral' solutions and would have the effect of restricting black and minority women's rights rather than expanding them (Dhaliwal 2017; SBS 2015). These critics argued that the criminalisation of SSA was not likely to make women safer in a context of shrinking service provision and could be detrimental to the very women it sought to help. These contributions were crucial in shaping the course of the debates on the proposed amendment, which was defeated.

South Asian feminists have been at the forefront of struggles against fundamentalism in the UK and have mobilised against the rise of religious fundamentalism in South Asia, including the rise of state-sponsored Hindutva politics in India. However, these cases discussed above have also highlighted the absence of uniform understandings of and commitment to challenging all forms of religious fundamentalism and the increasing detachment of feminist critique from secularism. This is reflected among some South Asian feminist groups in Britain who have adopted an anti-racist defence of all Muslim identities in the wake of the increasing Islamophobia following the so-called War on Terror, irrespective of whether these are expressions of a left leaning, egalitarian politics or markers of the successful influence of right

wing fundamentalist projects. On the other hand, some South Asian women's groups have developed close alliances with Christian, Hindu and Sikh fundamentalist formations without a critical or ethical eye on the motivations and objectives of these allies.

4. South Asian feminisms in the era of neo-liberalism and austerity

In contrast to the willingness of the British state to address particular forms of VAWG through essentialist discourses and resource-neutral solutions as discussed above, since the election of the Conservative (led) government of 2010, their ideological cuts to public services have led to the rapid erosion of specialist domestic violence services (Imkaan 2016). Research documents that women report feeling safer to speak about their experiences of violence in an environment where staff have the knowledge and expertise in providing specialist support to women, and that BME specialist services are often a woman's first point of contact and a conduit to statutory services (Larasi 2013). This erosion of BME specialist service provision has not gone unchallenged.

In 2008, SBS mounted a legal challenge against their local authority which had changed the terms of its funding on the grounds that specialist services for ethnic minority women worked against their commitments to community cohesion. The local authority decided to commission a generic domestic violence service instead. SBS was concerned that, if left unchallenged, Ealing Council's approach would have allowed public bodies to redefine the notion of equality, which in this context had become 'the need to provide the same services for everyone' (Patel and Sen 2011) —a radical departure from the recognition of intersectionality that had led to the creation of specialist services in the first place. Meanwhile, SBS discovered that the same local authority was using their Prevent and Cohesion funds to create and consolidate religion-specific groups, including Muslim women's groups. This replicated developments in other parts of the country, where BME community and women's groups were forced to transform the nature of their organisations either by becoming generic services for all women fleeing violence to abide by the terms of new commissioning regimes (that also require organisations to do more for less money) or by establishing Muslim specific programmes in order to attract Prevent or Cohesion funding (Kundnani 2009). SBS won that legal challenge[3] based on their argument that BME specific services continue to be vital spaces within which minority women become empowered and more able to participate in the wider public sphere. Moreover, they

underlined the importance of secular spaces both for challenging fundamentalism and for enabling cohesion.

Sadly, not all South Asian women's organisations have been able to muster the resources or the capacity to initiate and sustain a campaign or a judicial challenge to this retrenchment of specialism. This is also a consequence of the gradual erosion of their campaigning or political work in response to constraints imposed by state funding and registered charitable status, which proscribes political work or campaigning. This has led to the professionalization of domestic violence services, which has now left some organisations unable to resist what is an ideologically driven challenge to their very existence. Where such a reduction of specialism has taken place, these services have lost their autonomy, become part of a suite of services offered by a large, single provider and become delinked from the specialist BME women's sector (and movement). Imkaan (2016) argues that this delinking is particularly problematic, in that the development of autonomous BME spaces has been an essential element of BME women's strategies not only of surviving violence, but of organising to prevent and resist violence - "As such we are not just losing services, we are losing expertise, specialism and 'voice'" (Imkaan 2016: 15).

The multiple and intersecting needs that BME women experiencing domestic violence face on account of the disadvantages created by gender, race, class and religion have not dissipated. In this context, the undermining of funding for specialist services threatens to once again create a landscape where some women find themselves unable to leave an abusive relationship for safe and supportive spaces. The refuge movement grew out of women's activism in response to unmet needs. In a context of austerity and ideological resistance to specialism, the space to meet those needs seems to be shrinking once again.

5. <u>Conclusion</u>

We have explored the nature and trajectory of the ideological drivers and challenges for South Asian feminist organising in Britain which come from a confluence of interconnected factors: the persistence of violence against women and girls; the neo-liberal retrenchment of the state; the increasing turn to religion by the state; the rise of fundamentalism in civil society; as well as by ongoing issues posed by racism and essentialist 'othering' discourses reproduced by the British state, within civil society and by some strands of white feminism. This analysis charts

the history and the politics of South Asian feminisms in Britain more broadly but particularly in England, which mirror feminist engagements in other diasporic contexts where issues posed by gender inequalities intersect with race, class and religion. These struggles also arguably resonate with feminist mobilisations in India and in South Asia.

Endnotes

1. Our focus is primarily on South Asian feminist activism in England. However, many of the historical issues that have shaped this activism relate to Britain more broadly, particularly prior to the creation of devolved governments in Scotland and Wales in 1999. In part, our focus on England is related to the most 'visible' manifestations of South Asian feminist activism which has often centred around a few key organisations/movements. We are aware that we have not paid attention to the specific histories and issues that have shaped diaspora communities and South Asian women's organising that has been specific to Scotland and Wales.

2. The Prevent programme was set up by the Labour government in 2005 as one part of its anti-terrorism Contest strategy. Despite being one of the most contentious and widely critiqued public policies for some time (Dhaliwal 2019, Kundnani 2009), Prevent has continued as the main government strategy against radicalisation under the Conservative-led Coalition government (2010-15) and the subsequent Conservative governments (2015-).

3. See R (Kaur & Shah) v Ealing London Borough Council & EHRC [2008] EWHC 2062 (Admin)

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