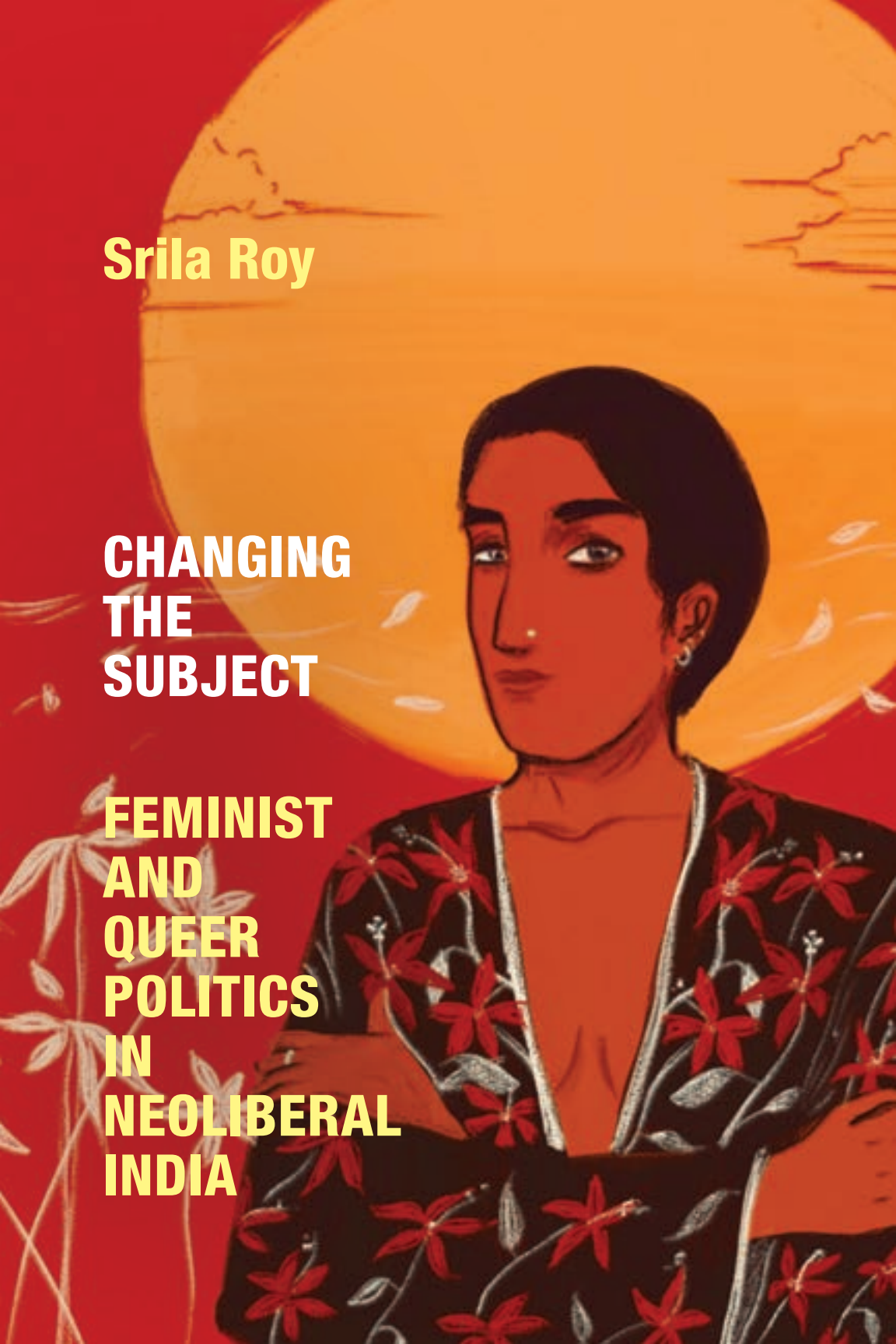
Srila Roy

CHANGING THE SUBJECT

FEMINIST AND QUEER POLITICS IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA



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FEMINIST AND QUEER POLITICS IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA

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To Mira and Salomé
My cannonballs and unicorns
And to Alf
Who is the whole of the moon

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AIDWA	All India Democratic Women's Association
AWM	Autonomous Women's Movement
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CALERI	Campaign for Lesbian Rights
CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
FTM	female-to-male
ITPA	Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act
IWM	Indian women's movement
JU	Jadavpur University
MFI	microfinance institution
MTF	male-to-female
NALSA	National Legal Services Authority
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NRC	National Register of Citizens
PBGMS	Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti
SC	Scheduled Caste
SFE	Sappho for Equality
SHG	self-help group
SRS	sex reassignment surgery
UN	United Nations
VG	Vigil Group

PREFACE
WE, FEMINISTS

Feminist histories are histories of the difficulty of that we*, a history of those who have had to fight to be part of a feminist collective, or even had to fight against a feminist collective in order to take up a feminist cause.*

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2017

This is a book about feminism and feminist subjects. It is about how feminist subjects are made—and make themselves—in a time and place not considered amenable to the production of such subjects. Our times are marked by extraordinary forms of oppression and abjection—toward gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies in particular. The scale of gender and sexual violence, victimization, and inequality leaves one breathless, unable to fathom its cessation or undoing. The Global South has historically functioned to provide the evidence to confirm this sorry state of affairs. It has provided a readily available site for external intervention, in supplying the raw material—the objects and others—and the moral certitude for an interventionist epistemology and politics located outside its boundaries but enacted in its name. It has served less as a site of feminist struggle in its own right than of the making of feminist subjects elsewhere.

Considerable energy has gone into debunking these assumptions—that feminism originates in the West and spreads as what Sara Ahmed (2017, 4) calls an "imperial gift" to the non-West, which is, in turn, the home of other women who fortify the agency of white Western women as feminists. We now have stories of being a feminist and of living a feminist life in very many places in the world, in struggles with very many patriarchies. We have our own stories, but we also have our own unique postcolonial burdens when it comes to "telling feminist stories" (Hemmings 2011). Our stories have undertaken two tasks at once: of speaking back to local patriarchs

who have dismissed our feminist struggles as derivative of Western ones and of undermining the forms of cultural and historical othering that have fundamentally shaped white Western feminisms. We, too, were making history, we have had to say—to establish ourselves as subjects worthy of national citizenship and belonging, on the one hand, and as agential, feminist subjects, on the other—while simultaneously bringing questions of sexual and gender difference to their limit in favor of what some would call intersectionality. And yet, the loudest feminist voices continue to belong to white feminists in the northern metropole, whose power derives from their capacity to exclude and to appropriate, for the sake of foregrounding not "me, too" but in fact, "me, not you" (Phipps 2020, 3).

Part of the centering of this *me*—even in accounts critical of this very move—is not only the exclusion of other feminist voices and histories but also their inevitable flattening into an essentialized and homogeneous mass. Given that *our*—as opposed to *their*—feminisms have been constituted through an unavoidable dialogue with the West and the nation-state, we have ended up speaking as if in one voice, with the *we* of our stories constituting a perfect foil to the *me* of white Western feminisms at scales both global and local. But who is this *we*? Or, to put it differently, who is the subject of our feminisms? If it has become possible to imagine feminist politics and futures without having to posit an essentialized subject—implicitly white and Western—then how sustainable is it to think of feminist subjects *elsewhere* in singular, uniform, uncontested, and internally undivided terms? If anything, the category of *woman* has proved even less sustainable in the rest of the world, where gender has continually fractured in intersection with other categories of identity and difference. Yet the feminist stories that have proved most audible have proceeded on the basis of a given, stable *we*, affording less space to the histories of struggle that have led to its fragile and contested constitution, as Ahmed (2017) reminds us. It has proved still harder to tell a story of internal differences and power relations—of what is residual and emergent—within our feminisms (Williams 1977). To restore feminist subjects outside the West to their rightful position—as autonomous, knowing, and willful agents—they must be worthy not merely of recognition but also of judgment and critique.

I found feminism when it appeared deeply fractured. In the early 2000s, when I took my first ever gender studies courses as a recently arrived Indian graduate student in the United Kingdom, feminist stories were infused with feelings of loss. I read the work of northern feminists bemoaning the institutionalization of feminism—in the very women's studies programs

that were under siege in British universities. Away from home for the first time, I discovered—in a dislocation that Mary John finds conducive to the study of home—the "historical field of feminism in India" (1996, 122). Indian feminists were also engaged in a difficult internal debate about the limits of those ideals, categories, and subjects—of a *we*—that had constituted the foundations of their worlds and selves.

The tenor of these troubles did not come as a surprise to me. I had come of age in the 1990s in India, when caste- and religion-based cleavages were felt in transformative ways, even if not fully understood by young, privileged, and sheltered middle-class, upper-caste, metropolitan Indians like myself. When the city of Bombay, where I lived, was engulfed in flames after the demolition of the Babri Masjid (followed by a spate of coordinated bomb blasts across the city), I knew that the affects of a previous era—captured in state-sponsored slogans like "unity in diversity" (*anekta mein ekta*)—had long passed.[1] It was this past that Indian feminists mourned the loss of, and with it the certainty of their own political aspirations to speak on behalf of *all* Indian women, while attempting, at the same time, to self-reflexively tell a story of the past and how it had gone wrong: how was it possible that the feminist *we* had turned out to be nothing more than a mere fiction?

These were affects I both could and could not partake of. While these feminists, of a certain generation, were mourning the passing of feminism, Indian women and queers from subsequent generations were discovering feminism for the first time. Some were encountering feminist literature and politics at universities, and others in some of the newer spaces that a globalized India offered, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). When I first began to think seriously about the questions that would inform this book, I turned quite naturally to NGOs. Indeed, I often thought that had I not obtained funding for a PhD program and a subsequent stable job in a fast-imploding academic labor market, I might well have ended up in an NGO working on women's or sexual rights. It was obvious to me that these were spaces of feminist learning and doing (not unlike the classroom); yet, in generationally motivated stories, they were written off as depoliticized spaces productive only of "Nine-to-Five Feminists" (Menon 2004, 242n31).

Notwithstanding this emergent generational divide, there was much in common across distinct generations of Indian feminists. After all, "we" occupied the related spaces of professionalized academia and activism, not merely out of a shared ideological and political commitment but also because of our social backgrounds. The unnamed intimacies of class and caste enabled middle-class and upper-caste (*savarna*) Indian women to take

advantage of the "mobilities of education" that came postindependence and to later capitalize upon new globalized opportunities and become part of a growing international class of global elites (John 1996, 10). Unlike those in more lucrative and ethically dubious corporate jobs, we—activists and academics—never lost sight of the poor. What perhaps endured most, as Indian feminism was both lost and recalibrated at the hands of new feminist subjects, was a distinctly postcolonial mode of "speaking for" in which middle-class and upper-caste feminists took upon themselves the mantle of representing the interests of others. Feminism endured as an imperial gift in the postcolony, handed down from one generation of a privileged *we* to the next.

Feminism's pasts and others haunt the millennial feminist sites and subjects of this book, including those minority feminists who were no longer spoken for but instead spoke for themselves. Even as they powerfully interrupted the we of Indian feminism, they could not escape its class, caste, and metrocentric biases, or the ethics and politics of "saving" others—of all genders and sexualities. I am able to mobilize this critique by bringing into the fray the voice and agency of those individuals and groups that have been at the receiving end of imperial and metropolitan feminist aspirations. But as I attempt to restore subalterns as millennial feminist subjects in their own right, I remain mired in the pitfalls, even the violence, intrinsic to such projects of recovery, which only reinforce historical processes of objectification and othering (Spivak 1988).

The critiques offered in this book around activist or "NGO-ized" feminisms are well directed at academic feminists who have historically benefited from both: the subaltern's silence and (mediated) voice. But even in our conjoint failings, *we* are not equal. I have, on occasion, felt relief in my inability to do any real damage—given my limited capacity to effect any real change in this world—but NGO workers or activists who take on this responsibility are also more vulnerable for it. They are implicated in circuits of neocolonial funding in ways that academic critique can damage while leaving the imperial benefactor—and the individual academic—unharmed. And they can also feel betrayed when they hear the academic telling a different tale of their reported truths, rooted in an assumed *we* of feminist sisterhood and solidarity.

Finally, the *we* that constitutes class and caste belonging is also lived in complex and ambivalent ways, contra the assumptions of a homogenizing imperial gaze. If this book is filled with feminism's ghosts, then it is equally populated by those I call, after Nirmal Puwar (2004), space invaders, who

enter spaces not meant for them. In globalized and digitalized India, millennials are space invaders in not always obvious ways—they might have names that identify them as being upper caste but struggle to speak fluent English, and they might have consumer capacity but the "wrong" taste and so end up closeted in the wrong closet. Closets can offer comfort and safety from several registers of judgment and failing.

While researching this book, I failed at the only project I was socialized for—namely, heteronormative conjugality. Notwithstanding an education at prestigious schools and colleges in India, I was raised in anticipation of marriage in ways that are typical of the anglicized Bengali *bhadralok* (respectable) milieu I inhabit. I fulfilled these aspirations well—through a long-term relationship, a marriage, and motherhood—until I no longer did. Within a year, I found myself on unfamiliar ground: I moved from one country to another, endured a traumatic childbirth, was confronted with the end of a decade-long relationship with the father of my children, and became involved in a protracted custody battle. Such ruptures with heteropatriarchy are not easily folded into dominant caste, "cultured" Bengali families for whom they have less to do with custom or religion than with maintaining status and respectability (see Sen 2018). I often chose the comfort of passing than revelation. I also think I was embarrassed at my own failing, at being dumped so spectacularly. And this sense of embarrassment was enough to cast me, in my own eyes, as a bad feminist.

These are feelings that also haunt the subject(s) of the pages that follow, even if obliquely. They permeate some of the intense and intimate negotiations with norms and normativities that readers will encounter—negotiations that pervaded my own attachment to and rejection of heteropatriarchal norms, as well as Indian feminists' desires for a *we* rooted in a reified secular political past. Even as the individuals and communities at the heart of this book attempted to live in ways that transgressed the burdens of heterosexuality, patriarchal control, or even the seductions of consumer capitalism, they were all caught within it. After all, we are all caught, no matter how free. Who is there to judge us?

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Introduction
Changing the Subject of Indian Feminism

When mass protests around the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey erupted in Delhi toward the end of 2012, I watched from afar with amazement. I saw how this singular yet all too routine event—the rape and murder of a young woman—brought thousands of ordinary, mostly young, and mostly middle-class urban protestors onto the streets in India's capital and across the nation. So unprecedented were their numbers and force that in Delhi, at least, the police resorted to tear gas and water cannons to disperse furious crowds. I watched the event travel and engage global publics; feminists in South Africa, where I had recently arrived, asked when they would have their "Delhi moment." And with feminists back home I struggled to make sense of this seemingly new feminist consciousness and energy.[1]

It was only a few years ago that I had started researching the terrain of Indian feminist activism, and yet it already felt like a different moment. Across major cities, I met academics, activists, those working in gender and sexual rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and constitutive of distinct generations of Indian feminists. Those who saw themselves as belonging to something called the Indian women's movement (IWM) shared a common diagnosis of the present.[2] As a feminist lawyer who had been politically active since the 1980s told me, "the space for spontaneous, voluntary activism—of being an activist lawyer, for example—has gone. Radical discourse has gone. But the disparity between activists has increased because those at the grass roots remain unpaid and those working in NGOs lead a comfortable life because they are funded." A feminist academic, involved in similar movement circles in Delhi, explained the underlying logic behind such claims: "In India, there was always a strong sense of keeping funded and nonfunded activism and politics separate.... [T]o make a distinction between funded and autonomous politics, to raise the question of

responsibility, accountability, and who comes into the movement." With India's economic liberalization making it far easier to obtain transnational funds for social development work, this distinction mattered less than how funding was perceived to orient feminist priorities toward the agendas and imperatives of the state, the market, and international development. It challenges nothing, said an older feminist, who worked in publishing, as a way of explaining the consequent depoliticization of the IWM.[3]

Unlike feminists of this generation who were professionals in a range of sectors—from law to academia to journalism and publishing—and contributed to the movement outside of their work hours, a subsequent generation of women were fully employed by or even heading their own funded feminist organizations. For these women—who were said to have come into the movement through NGOs and not through activism—it was obvious that affectively charged proclamations of the political present concealed more than they revealed. "Funding—the taking or not taking of money from external sources—is articulated, if not explicitly, as a moral issue," said a younger feminist, the director of a Mumbai-based women's rights NGO. The more strident critiques of funded politics and "NGO-ization" also came, she argued, from places of privilege: "The issue about funding is also about women's work." Many like her, who saw themselves as straddling movement and NGO spaces, defended the need for institutional and financial support on multiple grounds: the sustainability and continuity of activism ("What kind of institution are you building? How will you give anything to young people coming in?"); the question of livelihoods and pay ("What is wrong with providing women good salaries to sustain themselves independently?"); the notion of feminist consciousness-raising ("We have glimpsed feminism within these organizations"); and the unexpected expansion of the remit of gender struggle ("The queer movement is also a product of this context"). Yet these defenses were haunted by the ghost of a "real" feminist; as an NGO worker in Bangalore remarked, "There is a definite sense that you have to measure up to some things to be called a real feminist."

An initial motivation for writing this book was to participate in this defensive logic by showing that accounts of contemporary feminisms as being co-opted, depoliticized, and lost were grossly inadequate. As generationally motivated narratives they told us more about nostalgia for a revolutionary past than they did about a rapidly transforming landscape of gender and sexual rights under conditions of global neoliberalism. By declaring feminist struggles as co-opted and depoliticized—a thing of the past—they

were also unable to make room for futurity. After all, few anticipated the kind of mass upsurge that took place around gender justice on the streets of Delhi in 2012. These protests overwhelmingly comprised young millennials whom many had dismissed as apolitical ("Young women are not joining the movement"), but, at times, it was hard to tell if they were feminist at all. If anything, they seemed to represent a still newer generation whose calls for the death penalty and castration of rapists suggested "the failure of several decades of feminism in this country" (Tellis 2012).

In a short period of time, then, I knew that the counter to nostalgia did not lie in defensive appraisals of the present that lent to celebratory affects. Ambivalence and contradiction marked the responses of those who understood the need for institutionalization, with a feminist organizer involved in both funded and nonfunded women's groups in Kolkata stressing, "there is a huge political shift once you become fully dependent on funding." From the carceral feminism of the ordinary millennial to the critical dispositions of the NGO-ized activist, these conversations laid bare the contradictions of feminist politics across the Global North and Global South. Above all, they suggested how feminist struggles were caught between being free or autonomous on the one hand and beholden or co-opted on the other. If in a previous generation, Indian feminists were reliant on forms of professional security to sustain their activism (equally emanating from the privileges of class and caste), a subsequent generation was insisting on but also wary of the risks of institutionalization. Across these generational divides were collective pledges to remain critical and resistant, yet few could claim to be entirely free of messy entanglements. As one queer feminist I interviewed in Delhi said to me, "You let loose an idea that is beyond your control. Everything gets co-opted."

This book locates itself in this struggle between being autonomous and being co-opted. More specifically, it concerns the present state of feminism in India through distinct forms of feminist and queer feminist activism that emerged and evolved in the eastern region of West Bengal since the 1990s.[4] A watershed decade in independent India, the 1990s coincided with the opening of the economy and the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms. Liberalization not only had far-reaching political and social effects—by advancing privatization and creating new patterns of wealth and inequality—but also reconfigured the terrain of existing social movements, like the women's movement, while giving rise and legitimacy to new sites of struggle around sexual rights. It was in this conjuncture that internal contradictions within the IWM became explicit, with worries that its mainstreaming, in

governmental and nongovernmental practices, amounted to nothing more than co-optation.

Changing the Subject shows that there is more to this story than co-optation and the polarizing stances of despair or defensiveness. It uses the current conjuncture—"postliberalization"—to trace longer and wider shifts in the logics and techniques of governing a range of gendered, classed, and sexualized subjects, especially in the Global South. Queer feminist governmentalities, as I call them, reveal a deep and dynamic historic architecture, which while entangled in global neoliberalism, is not reducible to it. In their explicit orientation toward changing the self, these governmentalities also constitute the conditions for making new subjects and selves. The interplay between techniques of governance and techniques of self-making is at the heart of this book, which offers a new way of knowing feminism, its practices, logics, subjects, and others. Feminism, I suggest, is shaped by governing forces while governing and shaping the conduct of individuals and groups, providing the tools to craft a new kind of self and way of life. As a conduct of conduct in the broadest possible sense *and* as a technology for remaking the self, feminism is thus always already co-opted while being a creative and transformative force in the world. It is this productive tension that this book inhabits, animated by hope in feminism's life- and world-making capacities.

I first began to map changes to the IWM, owing to India's liberalization, in 2009. Since then, the project developed around two self-identified feminist organizations located in West Bengal, a location that was rich in regional specificity. Originating in the 1990s, both organizations emerged as major players in the region's feminist field, being part of influential local, regional, national, and transnational networks for women's and sexual rights. Sappho for Equality (SFE), a queer feminist organization, had a history that mirrored a previous generation of autonomous Indian feminisms: beginning as a small support group of middle-class and metropolitan cisgender lesbian women, it became a fully funded NGO in ways that transformed activism, expanded geographies of intervention, and integrated marginalized queer activists into projects of governance on behalf of a range of queer subjects and communities. Unlike this trajectory of beginning in an autonomous mode and undergoing NGO-ization, Janam (its name has been changed to preserve anonymity) was representative of those "post-Beijing" NGOs that fused neoliberal development strategies (e.g., microfinance) with discourses of women's agency, rights, and empowerment. While both organizations had offices in the state's capital city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta, though always Kolkata to its residents), SFE was solidly

urban and middle-class, while Janam worked with the peri-urban and rural constituents of the surrounding southern belts. My entry into this field was facilitated by my familiarity with the region (the site of my first book) and fluency in the local language of Bengali, details of which I will return to at the end of this introduction.

Governmentality, Neoliberalism, Others

The two organizations, SFE and Janam, form key nodes of what in this book I call queer feminist governmentality to reference an assemblage of discourses, practices, and techniques aimed at empowering subaltern subjects of the Global South along the axes of gender and sexuality.[5] I trace changes in activist governance—changes that, in turn, changed the self—that were entangled in but not reducible to global neoliberalism. Thus, while this book maps queer feminist governmentalities at the point of intersection with neoliberal logics and techniques as they manifested in India, it insists—alongside critical scholarship to which my thinking is indebted—that neoliberalism is no singular, pure, or unchanging formation.[6]

In understanding neoliberalism not as politico-economic structure but as a migrating governmental logic in the Foucauldian sense of governmentality, Carla Freeman (2014, 18) emphasizes (after Ong 2006) how it "can be adapted and melded within specific conditions, through specific cultural forms, in time and space." Analyses of this sort showed how, in the Global South, neoliberalism was not a vernacularized version of the global dominant or in opposition to local culture. It did not enter an empty, unmarked space, and neither did it invent things from scratch. It is, in fact, neoliberalism's tenacious capacity to appropriate—rather than simply co-opt—what exists and make it do different, distinct work that posed the specific kinds of ideological and political challenges that we face—namely, the increased inability to draw clear dividing lines between different and even oppositional political projects (including neoliberalism and feminism; see Calkin 2017; Fraser 2009; McRobbie 2009; and Rottenberg 2018). To put it simply, neoliberalism looks very different in different parts of the world, which should go some way to reduce "its density and totalizing weight—and the analytical and political breathlessness that such weight induces" (Clarke 2008, 145).

A key manifestation of neoliberal transformation was scalar in how governance expanded beyond the state and implicated nonstate entities and actors in techniques of government otherwise associated with the state, such that the state shrank but government grew (Ferguson 2011, 63; Ferguson and

Gupta 2002). In these changing state and civil society relations, where state functions of governance and development shifted to nonstate or nongovernmental arenas, NGOs mattered. Whether actively collaborating with the state or acting in state-like ways, NGOs exuded forms of governmentality and sovereignty.[7] An understanding of neoliberal governance as permeating the social not only complicates the dichotomous—and affectively loaded—ways in which divides between states and nonstate actors are produced but also assumptions that the one (the state) co-opts the other (NGOs). Throughout this book, I show the material transformations to activism in processes of NGO-ization, evident in its scalar expansion, from the local to the transnational; its professionalization and institutionalization; its imbrication in biopolitical fields of managing population groups; and its promotion of certain selves and modalities of working on the self in new arts and techniques of government.

And yet, activism was a deeply productive terrain of regulation, discipline, and creative self-formation that was not reducible to the dynamics of NGO-ization alone or to transnational neoliberal compulsions. Both SFE and Janam employed a range of governmental techniques, some of which were obviously neoliberal (like microcredit), while others attempted to queer neoliberal logics and practices, but all showed neoliberalism's ability to adapt and repurpose—that is, to retool—what exists to new effect (see Von Schnitzler 2016). Both organizations relied, for instance, on forms of consciousness-raising that were a product of mixed and complex genealogies, from the local Left to transnational development and human rights discourses. These concrete instances of neoliberalism's entanglement with others also revealed important continuities in a range of contrasting ideological projects—feminist and queer, the Left and neoliberalism—that in turn informed the distinct motivations and workings of organizations that were similar but also distinct from each other. The targets of their emancipatory imaginations and interventions (girls, women, lesbians, and transpersons) displayed an amenability, or a "readiness," to be governed that one could trace to their being subject to successive, multiple—but not always successful—projects of governance and rule.[8] It is, in fact, the proclivity toward reappropriation and resignification that leaves hegemonic projects—like neoliberal development—vulnerable to disruption, destabilization, and even failure. Subaltern politics have historically flourished in these cracks and fissures.[9]

It should be obvious that neoliberalism was not only experienced differently in specific locales—where it was overlaid by other techniques and logics

of regulation—but that it also evoked a plurality of times. This is a claim that is obvious but also hard to make given the temporal—and affective—stakes in producing the global neoliberal through a register of difference and discontinuity. Liberalized India signaled a break with a third world past and the arrival, on the world stage, of a modernized and globalized "brand new nation" (Kaur 2020). In these linear progressivist temporalities, women's and gay rights served to contrast one India, "new and modern," from another, "old and backward," as was manifest in international media reportage of the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey (Roychowdhury 2013, 282). In critical feminist scholarship, in contrast, liberalization and globalization and their consequential processes for the IWM (like institutionalization and NGO-ization) marked not progress but co-optation, depoliticization, and decline.[10]

Against narratives of progress or loss, I found in the feminisms of the present the coexistence of multiple times, to surprising affect. While queer politics was predictably attached to futurity, it also felt backward in echoing with "older" modes of governing subaltern subjects in the Global South.[11] These forms of millennial feminism, as I call them, were haunted by feminisms past—by the terms of political intelligibility and the kinds of authentic subjects that these had served to institutionalize and normalize. If anything, activists turned to the past in more explicit, even defensive ways in the face of threats of co-optation in the present. They remained locked in the horizon of political possibility made available in a previous, preliberalization era, if from only a few years earlier. The historical and cultural lineages they most relied on were also quintessentially local, and I show how it was regional idioms of feminist politics that accrued activists the greatest forms of legitimacy and value. Hauntings of this kind complicate easy assessments of the present as succeeding the past or the global as decimating the local; they did not have uniformly transgressive or nonnormative effects, either. There are indeed multiple hauntings and ghostly figures at play in the queer and nonqueer feminist sites I explore in this book, but with messier and more ambivalent effects than seductive readings of feminist and lesbian hauntings might make room for.[12]

If the sites of this book evoke a past, then they equally gesture toward an authoritarian future that has now come to pass. While the time of my research was saturated with concerns around global neoliberalism, the time of the writing of this book has reoriented us toward authoritarian regimes and spectacular state violence against Black, Dalit, and Muslim lives.[13] But these are scarcely separate times, in ways that a neoliberal nationalist India

especially demonstrates. Hindu nationalism has worked in tandem with neoliberalism; it has successfully fused neoliberal accumulation strategies with religious majoritarianism to build legitimacy (Kaur 2020; Nilsen 2020).

Be it liberalization, global neoliberalism, or right-wing Hindu nationalism, the challenges that grip the present are fundamentally plural and can hardly be explained in terms of any one factor. Mary John has consistently uncovered the multiple political traditions that inform the IWM to show how accounts of the co-optation of an autonomous women's movement can flatten its entanglements in processes both historical and ongoing, local and transnational, close to and away from power (John 2009, 46; see also John 1999, 2002). John's plea for richer narratives of the recent developments in the IWM is one that I hope to furnish. By situating feminism at the convergence of neoliberal governmentality and its others—as a governmentality in its own right—I discern shifts, big and small, in relations and rationalities of power, and their effects on society and selves. While these effects may be disciplinary and normalizing in ways that are consonant with state governmentalities, they are also transformative in ways that might surprise us.

Even as such an approach has its advantages—especially for making sense of a heterogeneous present (see, for instance, Walters 2012)—it is not without its limits or problems. After all, governmentality has become yet another totalizing way to speak about power, leaving little room for considering its limits (see Death 2016). I prefer to think of governmentality in a straightforwardly Foucauldian sense: never as describing a state of sheer domination, oppression, or constraint—as we tend to think and feel about power—but as a highly generative, mobile, and reversible set of relations and techniques through which a self is both governed and governs itself. This is what makes a governmentality approach both overwhelming and unique: how it encompasses the governance of the self by external forces *and* the government of the self by the self, or everything from the state's techniques of governing populations to the micropolitics of the self. The specific focus on the interplay of technologies of governance and technologies of the self enables questions—not only around how one is governed but how one let's oneself be governed—that cannot be posed within totalizing analytics of power and domination. At the heart of the kind of NGO and activist governmentality this book considers is the constitution of new forms of self, enabling insights into feminism as a site of governance and power that contains within itself the capacity for ethical self-making and resistance.

Self-Government

The feminist and queer governmentalities that I consider in this book were defined, most fundamentally, by their subject-producing nature. From the services they provided (counseling, advocacy, training, and income generation) to the tools and techniques they employed (consciousness-raising, sensitization, awareness-raising, self-help, and peer support) the two organizations sought to transform the individual through specific forms of labor performed by the self on the self. Such interventions dovetailed with the kinds of assumptions and practices that were paradigmatic of millennial development on the one hand and neoliberal feminism on the other, besides showing their convergence upon distinct sites.

Who were the addressees of such interventions? My interlocutors in this book were ambiguously positioned, as both target group and activist in SFE and as agent and beneficiary of development in Janam. I am less interested in carving out a space to assess impact on beneficiaries and choose to stay instead with an ambiguous set of subject positions that these governmental practices produced. As advocates of specific humanitarian and development goals, my interlocutors were active instruments of queer feminist governmentality, incited to empower the self for governing—empowering—others. They saw themselves as being in the business of doing good and of saving the less fortunate, and they erected divides between themselves, "those who will to empower," and the object of this will (Cruikshank 1999, 125). Yet the emancipatory pedagogies and tools on offer were as much about governing, (re)orienting and caring for the self as they were about caring for or empowering others.[14] This enabled a central claim of this book: if feminism can be thought of as a form of (neoliberal) governmentality, it can also be considered a project of self-government and transformation.

Indeed, one of the unique aspects of neoliberalism is how it informs entirely new ways of relating to the self and constitutes new kinds of subjects and subjectivities (W. Brown 2015; Foucault 2008; Lorenzini 2018; Oksala 2013; Rose 1999). Feminists insist that the kind of subject most amenable to neoliberal subjectification is feminine. In other words, women are ideal neoliberal subjects, incited—to a much greater degree than men—to self-regulate, self-discipline, self-manage, and self-transform (see Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009; Rottenberg 2018; and Scharff 2014). While northern feminists arrived at these conclusions in charting the rise and dominance of neoliberal subjectivities in popular culture and the media, southern feminists uncovered the racialized, and not just gendered, nature of "homo

œconomicus" (Foucault 2008) as manifest in good governance agendas and corporatized development initiatives (Hickel 2014; Koffman and Gill 2013; Li 2007; Moeller 2018; Rankin 2001; Wilson 2015). In South Asia, critical feminist ethnographies honed our attention on how neoliberal development, through technologies of self-empowerment, self-help, enterprise, and responsibilization, emerged a robust terrain of changing subjectivities and making selves (see Jakimow 2015; Madhok 2012; D. Sen 2017; and Sharma 2008).

While these observations drove my interest in the making of a new, neoliberal self, they also cautioned against certain tendencies. In much critical feminist commentary, neoliberalism appears to hail gendered and sexualized subjects in much the same ways, such that a neoliberal feminism appears aspirational and promissory to all, everywhere.[15] Subjects in the Global South fare particularly poorly in such analyses, which end up producing younger, urban, and class-privileged women as mimetic of a neoliberal feminist subject in the Global North, and rural working-class women as curiously passive, a perfect foil to the excessive agency that neoliberalism endows them with. In contrast, the literature that explores a plurality of subjects, ways of making the self and concrete lives under neoliberalism—especially in postcolonial locales—remains limited, as does our capacity to imagine subjective orientations toward neoliberal environments in diverse, nuanced, and even resistant ways.[16] Even as a neoliberal ethics of entrepreneurialism has indeed globalized, Carla Freeman (2014, 4) reminds us that "the kind of subject being mobilised, the nature of the labour they are performing, the feelings rallied and produced within this supple and unstable system, and the meanings these affects hold cannot be assumed to be consistent." Neoliberal governmentality's heightened hailing of a gendered and racialized self—especially in places "less inclined towards thinking reflexively about selves"—offers, in fact, a unique opportunity to trace how modern power forms the self, without lapsing into the grip of disciplinary control (C. Freeman 2014, 4).[17]

Across the divides of class and caste, the urban and the rural, the local and the translocal, queer activists and development workers engaged not just in new acts, tastes, and relations but also in experiments in becoming different people. Self-government took the form of embodied and aesthetic practices—what others have called self-styling, self-fashioning, or self-making—and also an increased, more intense awareness and consciousness of the self and of social norms and their normalizing imperatives.[18] In their explicit orientation toward changing the self, activist and NGO governmen-

talities folded into personal projects of self-transformation (even as these bore the imprint of wider social and cultural forces). They offered not a set of rules or norms to be followed but sites and resources for self-making through which individuals could rework and reimagine the self and even exercise some choice with respect to what it means to be a certain person and live a certain life.

While this idea of choice might signal, for some, the entry through the back door of disciplinary power, it offered me other possibilities, especially as a way of moving beyond the tired debate around power and resistance that has long dominated feminist theorizing. Even as I was adamant that self-government was more than an imprint of governmentalities, I was equally skeptical of easy proclamations of resistance and agency (concepts also conflated with one another; see Mahmood 2005). The technologies of feminist and queer self-making I encountered in the field were, in any case, not amenable to such readings. They did not straightforwardly map onto the aspirations of activists and development practitioners for resistance, agency, or even antinormativity; on the contrary, self-making stabilized some norms while disrupting others, remaining firmly entangled in power. The relationship that one had to oneself, however free and empowering, was ultimately rooted in, and even reliant upon, a wider field and force of government.[19]

Given that neoliberalism entails a new way of governing the self, subjectivity is, however, a crucial site of struggle, for constituting ways of relating to oneself that might be an alternative to mainstream technologies (Lorenzini 2018).[20] In challenging the norms that constitute the self, one is also challenging the materials and conditions through which that self is constituted, or the wider social and political forces which exist in oneself. Self-transformation thus implies social transformation.[21]

Such proposals are not helpful to Indian feminists who have tended to regard the self as an inadequate site of real resistance and have fixed their gaze instead on the possibilities of collective identity and struggle alone.[22] A queer feminist I spoke to in Delhi back in 2009 claimed that the IWM was, in fact, haunted by these dynamics: "The main problem of the women's movement is that so much of [it] works for the *other*, that even though it's within the category of woman, the focus is on that oppressed woman *out there* who is not you. . . . If you hear the language of the movement, the word *us* is not used at all." She added, "What is energizing about queer activism is that the people who are engaged with it have something at stake."

It was such reflections that drew me toward questions and practices of queer and feminist self-making, especially in historical and regional settings saturated with political attachments to the other and not the self (and the prioritization of the collective over the individual). India's liberalization appeared an especially thick terrain of new subjects and selves, with fresh stakes and potential impacts on both the self and the world. Indeed, one of the central paradoxes that Indian feminists had to contend with was that while the IWM felt depoliticized, and even undone, in forms of institutionalization and transnationalism, successive generations of Indian women and sexual minorities assumed the front line of struggles against ever-expanding sexual violence and deepening state authoritarianism. New selves existed in a tenuous relationship to a neoliberal governmentality in whose crevices they had emerged, but also to world-making projects and possibilities. In other words, the relationship between governmentality and the self does not offer any straight line from the micropolitics of the self to wider political transformation.[23] In this book, I resist the urge to turn too quickly toward collective possibilities, staying instead at the scale of the individual, not only to mark the limits of government's reach and power but also to ask whether the self could constitute the locus of a new kind of governmentality and politics.

Indian Feminism and Its Subjects: Before and after Liberalization

Colonial and nationalist governmentalities, and postcolonial developmentalities, shaped the contours of the IWM, the origins of which are usually traced to nineteenth-century social reform efforts and the anticolonial struggle. While this was a remarkable period for the advance of Indian women—through changes to education, conjugality, and women's rights—it also pegged gender and sexuality to nation, culture, and nationalisms in fundamental and enduring ways. Even when only a small section of elite upper-caste Hindu women emerged as potentially rights bearing, these new subjectivities were overwritten by patriarchal concerns—and contests—over tradition, culture, and nation (P. Chatterjee 1989; Kapur 2005; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Sarkar 2001; S. Sen 2000). The woman's question was inseparable from the making of the nation, but also inseparable from the homosexual or, indeed, the lesbian question.[24] As Paola Bacchetta notes, "Lesbians may be constructed . . . as threats to, not embodiments of, heteronormative national culture; as dishonoring heterosexual male citizen-subjects because not appropriated by them; in *xenophobic*, *lesbophobic* terms, as originating outside

the nation and as antinational" (2002, 951–52, emphasis in the original). The "nationalist resolution of the women's question," as Partha Chatterjee (1989) famously put it, thus produced a foundational incommensurability between being Indian and being lesbian, one that would only be open to resolution at a much later time and, even then, only in incomplete ways (see Dave 2012).

The postindependence IWM—which came into its own as one of the new social movements in the 1970s—operated within the terms of political intelligibility formed in the colonial-nationalist moment (Omvedt 1993; Ray and Katzenstein 2005). It demanded rights and development from the postcolonial state on behalf of Indian women, construed as lacking in agency but also as singular and nonintersectional; *woman* was unmarked by caste, community, and sexuality in ways that made feminism "a form of identity politics" (Madhok 2010, 225). It was not until the arrival of a catalytic report in 1971 that Indian feminists were forced to confront the limits of the postcolonial Indian state.[25] The autonomous feminists of the 1970s and 1980s—middle-class, upper-caste, urban, educated, professional women of a leftist bent—threw their energies into filling the gap between state potential and its realization, turning their attention to poor women who had emerged as the worst off by all accounts.[26] A split between a feminist self, comprising middle-class metropolitan women, and its object of investigation and reform—poor, rural women at the grass roots, or "out there," to recall what one of my interlocutors suggested—helped to establish the cultural authenticity and local legitimacy of an otherwise elite, Western, and alien social movement (John 1996). The IWM's ability to speak on behalf of the poor, the "backward," and the morally virtuous (but not sexually desiring) yielded tangible, even profitable, outcomes with the influx of foreign aid, under economic liberalization (Dave 2012). At the convergence of distinct governmentalities—colonial, nationalist, and neoliberal—was the figure of the subaltern woman, who emerged as the preeminent subject of Indian feminism and afforded generations of activists the right to speak on behalf of those rendered reified and spectral.[27]

Liberalization was understood as disrupting nationalist frames and transforming the discursive contexts in which issues like gender and sexuality were raised, framed, and fought for. Neoliberal economic reforms were inaugurated—stealthily and unevenly (R. Jenkins 1999)—from 1991 onward as a response to the fiscal crisis of the Indian state and the contradictions of state-managed development. It was fast recognized as a thoroughly elite project, serving elite interests and reinforcing elite status, as a response to

democratizing drives from below (Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2003). In addition, liberalization came to be associated with the rise of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a political force to be reckoned with. This process reached its apogee under the regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (since 2014), which was far more aggressively supportive of corporate and capitalist interests than the earlier BJP government of Atal Vihari Vajpayee (1999–2004) and also more openly antidemocratic and authoritarian, especially toward religious minorities and vulnerable caste groups.

Constituting a watershed moment for Indian feminists, liberalization reconfigured the material and normative terrain of their struggles away from the episteme of the nation-state (John 2014). Feminists were directly implicated in the expansion of state logic and governance on the one hand and in the proliferation of global development and humanitarian agendas on the other. They entered into unprecedented collaborations with the state and became new actors in global donor networks and markets of social movement and humanitarian intervention. Feminist-inspired state institutions and reformed laws around sexual violence emerged just as new organizational forms, such as NGOs, came into play. These NGOs fundamentally transformed the organizing of Indian feminism from the autonomous feminist formations of the 1970s—which, though small, departed to the IWM its public visibility and legacy—to more structured and professionalized organizations, constituting "a move out of movement mode," as one of the older feminists I initially met described it.

Even as I document these changes to the terrain of feminist mobilizing in liberalized India in chapter 1, I point to their paradoxical implications—namely, how India's economic liberalization not only signaled the cooptation and depoliticization of struggles around gender and sexuality but also amplified their visibility and vitalization in unexpected ways. If the IWM was considered testament to the former trend, then the emergence of a new terrain of activism around sexuality—comprising sex worker and queer politics—embodied the other (see Lakkimsetti 2020; Menon 2009; Mokkil 2019; and Vijayakumar 2021). The 1990s coincided with the global fight against HIV/AIDS, catalyzing organizing around sexuality and offering—for the first time—concrete material support to sexual subalterns themselves. These included groups that were also historically marginalized by the elite, Hindu, and heteronormative lineages of Indian feminism; a sexually conversative mainstream IWM had not always made space for the recognition and agency of sex workers, for instance (see Kotiswaran 2011;

and Menon 2007a). The Mandal-Masjid years,[28] as a critical period in the 1990s came to be known, forced feminists to confront their own majoritarianism, which was highly amenable to a growing upper-caste Hindu nationalism. It also raised a more fundamental question: Who is the subject of feminist politics?[29]

If liberalization transformed the terrain of existing struggles while giving rise to new ones, then it also saw a proliferation of millennial subjects, embodiments of neoliberal self-making. The new middle classes—comprising disproportionately those who were also upper-caste and Hindu—were at the heart of "India Shining," the name of the BJP's 2004 election campaign and ubiquitous metaphor of the successes and failures of liberalization. Even as it made up less than a quarter of the population (Jodkha and Prakash 2016), it was this class that came to represent a major shift in national culture—from ideologies of state-led development and consumer moderation to rampant consumption and entrepreneurialism—besides emerging as both a beneficiary and a proponent of economic liberalism and the BJP's political illiberalism (Fernandes and Heller 2006; see also Baviskar and Ray 2015; Deshpande 2003; Kaur 2020; and Mazzarella 2005). Gender and sexuality were key to the consolidation of the transnationality and modernity of the "new" middle class, ensuring it was "appropriately Indian" (Radhakrishnan 2011; see also Donner 2008; Fernandes 2000; Oza 2006; Thapan 2004; and, on similar dynamics across South Asia, Hussein 2017). They also constituted the grounds for a domestic reconfiguration of a "Brahmanical Hindutva" and bolstered the legitimacy of the Hindu Right under Modi, which assumed a specific form of gender and sexual governance (Rege 1998, 43; see also Baxi 2019).

The neoliberal conjuncture afforded unprecedented queer possibilities. The market, for instance, recognized that Indian queers enhanced the global attractiveness of "Brand India" and offered some inclusion well before the Indian state did (Boyce and Dutta 2013; Shahani 2017; Sircar 2017; Sircar and Jain 2017a). The market did not recognize all queers, however, and while some (cisgender middle-class metropolitan gay men and even women) were interpellated as "model capitalist subjects," others (historically marginalized and stigmatized transgender communities) lobbied the state on the basis of their "backwardness," an available site from which to demand redistributive measures (Rao 2020b, 25). These dynamics, which were pronounced in the run-up to and the afterlife of the decriminalization of homosexuality, showed the different temporalities at work among queers at the same time and place.

In the chapters that follow, we meet several of those whom Ritty Lukose (2009) has called "liberalization's children," from lower-middle-class urban queer activists to rural lower-caste development workers. We are perhaps more used to encountering such groups in distinct, even incommensurate ethnographic worlds, associated with either consumption and pleasure on the one hand and with poverty and development on the other, in ways that also exaggerate their apartness from each other (Chandra and Majumder 2013; Jalais 2010). While the middle-class queer activists of this book fit seamlessly into narratives of modernity, fashion, and youth consumption, rural development workers who are of the same generation fall outside it. They are not the imagined modern girls of liberalized and globalized India—a narrow construct that hails the middle-class, upper-caste, English-speaking cosmopolitan self and marginalizes those from lower-class, lower-caste, and nonmetropolitan backgrounds (Lukose 2009). Instead this book establishes rural women not only as "liberalization's children in their own right" but as millennial feminists (Lukose 2009, 7). It also nuances the new Indian middle classes of a liberalized and globalized India by showing their diversity and heterogeneity. The queer feminists I met not only hailed from a range of social backgrounds but also inhabited blanket categories of "middle classness" in messy ways, which revealed the historic and regional work that class performed in this context.[30] Whether from the middle class, the lower middle class, or at the margins of class privilege, the individuals that constitute the core of the book took up the NGO-ized subjectivities, relations, and aspirations on offer to fulfill desires for personal autonomy, mobility, and modernity, even as these were realizable in highly partial, precarious, and exclusionary ways.

Millennial West Bengal: Settings and Methods

Kolkata and its peri-urban fringes are the sites of this book, shaped by affectively charged and historically enduring imaginaries that make up a "West Bengal exceptionalism."[31] Crumbling urban infrastructure, a haunting colonial cityscape, left-wing intellectualism, and *adda* (chat) and *cha* (tea) have always been part of Kolkata's uniqueness. They are what make it different from, and even an alternative to, the hypercapitalist modernity represented by other major Indian cities. If the "rumor of Calcutta" (Hutnyk 1996) made the city attractive to white hippie tourists and saviors alike, then this rumor was also part of what Ananya Roy (2003, 9) has called the "self-orientalization" that the Bengali communists excelled in. The city's

marginalization acted as the perfect foil to their investment in a vision of plentiful and utopian Bengali rurality, "the fiction of a *Sonar Bangla*," or a Golden Bengal (Ananya Roy 2003, 24).[32] These were also gendered constructs, with the city being the domain of the *bhadralok*, the upper-caste, middle-class Bengali gentleman, and the village standing for, in nationalist, communist, and postcommunist rhetoric alike, the motherland (see Nielsen 2018).[33] Both the city (the "rumor of Calcutta") and the village ("the fiction of a *Sonar Bangla*") lent to assumptions of exceptionalism (Ananya Roy 2003, 24).

The region was also marked by a history of left-wing dominance, represented by the thirty-four-year rule of the Left Front government, one that exceeded the electoral success of comparable communist parties in democratic contexts. Evaluations of its long reign, which ended in 2011, were consistent. Most agreed that the Left Front's major rural reform policies, such as decentralized governance and the redistribution of agricultural land, were of benefit to the middle peasantry, who became a new rural elite, but excluded the majority of the rural poor and kept structures of poverty intact.[34] Untouched by land reforms, the rural poor flocked to the city, as domestic servants and day laborers in highly gendered patterns of "distress migration" that took place throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Ananya Roy 2003). Even as Kolkata's fortunes had steadily declined since independence and partition, the communists showed little interest in urban revival. They were eventually left with no choice but to turn to urban development, in the face of stagnant agricultural growth and a new liberalized economy where Indian states could no longer rely on central assistance but had to compete to attract foreign investment. The Left Front embarked on a "New Communism," one that was "for the new millennium, a communism as comfortable with global capital as with sons of the soil" (Ananya Roy 2003, 10). It undertook projects to clean up or "beautify" the city by forcibly removing street hawkers and squatters and erecting middle-class housing developments that displaced the poor. Such forms of appropriation and dispossession came to a head in the violent clashes that took place between the government and resistant forces around planned industrial developments in Nandigram and Singur, iconic sites of India's new land wars (S. Majumder 2018; Nielsen 2018).

These events were considered instrumental in bringing about the electoral defeat of the Left and the rise to power of the opposition party, the Trinamool Congress, under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. An upper-caste, lower-middle-class woman with little social capital and often dismissed as a mere populist, Banerjee represented a major shift in the genteel

and middle-class—*bhadralok*—politics of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM (see Nielsen 2016). She brought caste and religion back into the political fray, in contrast to the upper-caste, "secular" communists who had subordinated caste to class and refused to take religion seriously.[35] Unlike the southern part of the country, with its history of resisting upper-caste hegemony, and the north, with its strong Dalit Bahujan political parties representing the interests of Dalits and the lower castes, West Bengal never witnessed any comparable "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot 2003).[36] And even as it did not face communal violence, not since its own bloody partition history, West Bengal's Muslims were marginalized under Left Front rule.[37] Postcommunist West Bengal created ripe conditions for the entry of the BJP, an otherwise nonplayer in regional politics (Basu and Das 2019; Daniyal 2019; Mukherjee 2019). More so than ever before, the new millennium belied any claims toward Bengali exceptionalism.

As it was for caste and religion, the communist and postcommunist record on gender was uneven at best. The gendered patterns of rural-to-urban migration that Ananya Roy (2003) found confirmed how little the Left Front's land reforms had done to shift existing gender imbalances in rural areas (A. Basu 1992; Da Costa 2010). Its other major claim to success—decentralization through the restructuring of the panchayat system of local governance—also did little to enhance women's political representation at this scale (A. Basu 1992). And notwithstanding the Left's emphasis on women's economic empowerment—to "stand on one's own two feet," as the slogan went—West Bengal had absurdly low workforce participation among women (Goswami 2019). The region also did poorly when it came to social indicators in comparison to the rest of the country; it lagged behind the national average on women's literacy, and had some of the highest rates of child marriage in the country, which were still higher among Muslims and Scheduled Caste groups (Sanyal 2014; Sen and Sengupta 2012). Neoliberal development schemes like cash transfers, introduced by the Trinamool Congress to promote women's education and curb child marriage, reinforced hegemonic gendered norms that they intended to subvert (Ray Chaudhury 2020). And while some middle-class women were able to take advantage of the newer professional opportunities on offer, such as in the technology and service industries, women across all classes were hardly optimistic of neoliberal change in West Bengal (Donner 2008; Ganguly-Scrase 2003).

The region's nineteenth- and twentieth-century legacies of nationalism, social reform, and left-wing hegemony—which informed distinct and highly gendered projects of governance and rule—might have made it a fertile

ground for the birthing of feminist ideals, radical women's movements, and robust political representation. Available scholarship has revealed the opposite to be true (A. Basu 1992; R. Ray 1999; Sinha Roy 2011; S. Roy 2012b; Sarkar 1991). Raka Ray's (1999) foundational mapping of Kolkata's "fields of protests" showed how left-wing hegemony prevented the flourishing of more explicitly feminist currents, whether affiliated with the party or autonomous in relation to it; indeed, Bengali political culture was positively hostile to feminism. The women's wing of the Left bore absolute allegiance to the party, epitomized in its negotiation of a major gang rape case that implicated party members in the early 1990s (Da Costa 2010; Sarkar 1991). The Trinamool Congress's record on gender and sexual rights fared not much better.[38] The institutional cultures of both major political parties—as well as the BJP, which started making inroads in the region in later years—revealed a limiting milieu for advancing women's rights and for enabling their political participation. Major trade unions like the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and the Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress, which mobilized women workers, also tended to reflect their parent organizations rather than act independently (see P. Ray 2019).[39]

Nonparty and nonfunded, "autonomous" women's group proved less radical than comparable ones elsewhere in the country given their entanglement in leftist ideologies, from which they claimed autonomy (see R. Ray 1999). The region had, however, a long and robust history of women's participation in people's struggles (both communist-led struggles and those breaking away from the organized Left); women activists were invariably spoken for by male leadership in these spaces, however (Nielsen 2018; Sinha Roy 2011; S. Roy 2012c). It was one such key radical Left movement that gave me the story for my first book (S. Roy 2012c).[40] Many of these leftist women joined autonomous feminist groups in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was their biographies that organically led me from an exploration of leftist selves to forms of feminist self-making. Women's groups that asserted their autonomy from left-wing groups were gradually replaced by NGOs, to which the Left Front was initially hostile.[41] Both Ananya Roy (2003) and Raka Ray (1999) have wondered what NGOs would bring to millennial Kolkata, with Ray speculating whether they would "create an alternative political culture, one that perhaps will offer more space for a diversity of interests and voices" (1999, 166). At the start of the millennium, Nivedita Menon (2004, 222) declared that Ray's optimism was misplaced as NGOs were "driven by the compulsions of funding." This book takes off where Ray's ends; indeed, her study was the principal source of my initial interest

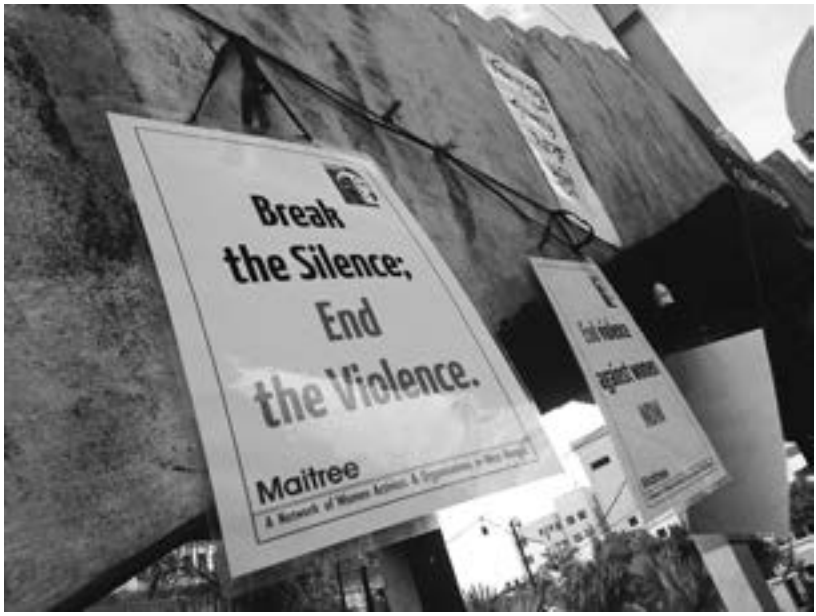

Figure I.1 Maitree poster. Photo by the author.

in a transformed terrain of feminist activism, caught between a sense of possibility and closure. While it was obvious that much had changed in the field that Ray had uncovered (of which NGO-ization was a key maker), much also remained the same. Leftist pedagogies and "structures of feeling" did not merely haunt NGO spaces and selves, but I also encountered the actual bodies of the Left as consultants and professionals in Kolkata's NGO sector (Williams 1977). Kolkata-based NGOs were part of Maitree (Friendship), a conglomerate of local women's groups and activists that lobbied the state on women's issues and constituted a feminist counterpublic in the gentleman's city. Maitree represented both dents in left-wing hegemony and its durability as it accommodated newer and queerer concerns—around sex work and LGBTQ rights—but in conditional ways.

Finally, new neoliberal and NGO governmentalities implicated the growth and rise of sexuality politics in the region, best represented by sex worker and LGBTQ activism. Millennial Kolkata emerged as a prominent site of sex worker organizing that, even though rooted in HIV/AIDS prevention work, developed its own direction and agency, in alliance with local feminist and labor organizing.[42] When it came to LGBTQ politics, the city was the site of informal collectives from the late 1980s onward, and this fed into

subsequent forms of more visible and interventionist queer organizing; the first Pride walk in the country is said to have taken place in Kolkata in 1999. Given that early forms of support were dominated by middle-class gay men and that the activism around HIV/AIDS—a crucial prehistory to the queer movement in India—focused on female sex workers and men who had sex with men, it was surprising that Kolkata became home to one of the few organizations for queer women in the area and even in the country. Queer feminist politics grew there, as elsewhere in the country, in a complex relationship of dependence and solidarity with women's groups. And even as the Left (and a leftist feminism) was not conducive to the flourishing of LGBTQ politics, a leftist milieu accommodated and did not violently repress—as did right-wing forces elsewhere in the country—more radical political articulations. These regional differences were obvious when trouble erupted in 1998 around what came to be known as India's first lesbian film, *Fire*, a critical event in queer feminist politics at national and regional scales.[43]

Sappho, the support group that preceded SFE, emerged out of the "*Fire* moment" and changed considerably during my research, going from Sappho, a support group, to SFE, the NGO. This trajectory made possible certain kinds of insights at particular times. In general, data collection for this project was contingent on the structure, membership, and changing life courses of the two organizations that constitute its core. With SFE, my main method of enquiry was the interview, shifting from more informal, conversational interviews in the early days to more formal ones in later years. While in an earlier time I would casually interview members in the neat residential flat in which the organization was housed, in later years I would meet a single individual—a project leader, for instance—at a "reception" area (also in a private home). Alongside interviews, I attended and observed some planning meetings and the Thursday meetings open to all SFE members (which I had signed up to become). I also met key respondents—over a period of time—within the organization's space or outside it, such as in a coffee shop of their choosing. The coffee shop was not an unimportant site for openly queer women, and it paved the way, in easy and extended conversations, for rich accounts of self-fashioning. The changing fortunes of SFE mirrored wider changes to queer culture, sociality, and activism in the city, and I gained valuable insights into the significance of these changes from those lesbian and transgender activists who emerged on the scene in later years and outside SFE.[44]

With Janam, my main method was that of participant observation. Again, the organization's distinct character and unusual degree of openness—in

comparison to other NGOs—determined the choice of method and data obtained. While Janam was housed in an office (in a cluster of residential flats), the life of the organization stretched well beyond these walls, especially through its microfinance institution (MFI), which spanned across fifty villages. The office space was reminiscent of NGOs elsewhere (see, for example, Thayer 2010): it was crowded with busy staff members and housed women who were engaged in production activities on-site. While I conducted formal interviews with staff members at the office, my interactions with grassroots development workers—who became core to my learning and interest—were mobile and multi-sited. I went where they went, which included regular field visits and training sessions on and off the NGO's premises. I took notes on their interactions with self-help groups (SHGs) and with each other, reserving more individual questions for our travel together (often a combination of bus, rickshaw, and foot travel) or when the workers were on lunch breaks. These women formed a strong friendship group and my presence and company on a range of sites and activities enabled the development of meaningful relationships with at least some of them. But whatever degree of closeness might have manifested between us—helped by subjective changes, such as my entry into parenthood, and material ones, like new mobile technologies that enabled us to stay in touch from afar—was undercut by fundamental locational, class, and caste-based differences. In addition to the intense periods of time I spent with this group of women, I observed a range of activities that made up Janam's everyday goings-on, including meetings for the MFI, SHG meetings, regular outreach events that took place in various villages, and protest action in Kolkata and in villages in which Janam participated.

I developed very different relationships not only with the two organizations but with their distinct constituents. It is fair to say that my relationship with Janam was of a closer nature, so much so that I shared with its founder some—critical—publications emerging from the research (processes of writing and sharing that felt troubling given a shared sense of solidarity). In this book, I present still sharper critiques based on my observation and interactions with those employees who were most precariously positioned in the organizational hierarchy and to whom I felt the greatest sense of commitment. It is primarily to protect and honor their courage of critique that I decided to anonymize not just individuals but the organization itself. In the case of SFE, while members' names are anonymized, I have retained the organization's name; given its distinct character, anonymity would be meaningless. I also felt that SFE had a strong enough public profile and

standing for the more critical observations made in this book, as voiced by some of its own members who were not vulnerable in the same way as subaltern women were (but have nevertheless been given a pseudonym). These critical claims might well have been facilitated by members' appreciation of me as an outsider, an unusual position to occupy given the intimate nature of most queer ethnographies (see, for example, Dave 2012).[45] Whether articulated by an insider or outsider, queer feminist critiques of feminist spaces and movements can constitute sources of hurt and conflict; we need, as I point out in this book's conclusion, practices of critique as care, not least because of the shrinking spaces and colossal costs of critique and dissent in India today.

An Overview of the Book

The chapters that follow locate feminist interventions and subjects across specific translocal sites of governance, affective economies of loss and aspiration, and entangled and enduring techniques of making gendered, racialized, and sexualized subjects in the Global South. Chapter 1 charts Indian feminism's entanglement in a range of convergent governmentalities, to hone in on a central paradox of the neoliberal moment—namely, its enabling of both the co-optation and intersectional expansion of gender and sexual rights. I trace how the state and law, development, the urban, and the digital have constituted fields of possibility for limiting and expanding queer feminist political horizons in ways that anxieties around neoliberal co-optation do not fully capture. Against the affective and analytical optics of a metrocentric neoliberal feminism that served to re-center northern trends and frame newer and younger feminist interventions in southern locales in derivative ways, I foreground specific feminist histories, geographies, and referents that newer activists have drawn on and departed from.

Chapter 2 traces the story of SFE—and its origins in the support group, Sappho—in ways that were inseparable from the trajectory of India's globalization and neoliberalism but also shaped by the affective weight of past feminisms that produced a backward-looking queer feminist politics. I trace activist beginnings in the need for the support and safety of lesbian women to the closure of the support group, premised on the opening of new spaces for queer sociality and support, especially in urban and digital milieus. The changed conditions that made activism possible—globalization, NGO-ization, new digital technologies, and the urban economy—created new regimes of normalization and regulation, in which older forms of inclusion and exclusion endured and made subaltern lesbians, in particular,

amenable to metrocentric and class-privileged—but also anticapitalist—political futures.

Chapter 3 presents queerness as a way of making life and the self in Kolkata, set against the accelerating temporalities of gay normalization, generational differences, and a queer political logic of "no going back." These constitute the conditions of a shifting horizon of possibility for queer people living in the city. Younger members of SFE were some of the first to occupy the spatiotemporal register of being out of the closet. In engaging a range of technologies of the queer self—somatic, aesthetic, and epistemic—I show how queer visibility does not equate with livability, and how young queers engage social norms in complex and fundamentally intersectional ways. For those located at the intersection of marginalized identities, queer self-making fashions new possibilities—revealing, for instance, some of the queer ways in which caste identities are inhabited in liberalized India.

In turning to feminist governmentality, chapter 4 offers an account of a richly layered terrain of "developing" subaltern women, shaped through the legacies of regional feminisms, the developmentalist state, the local Left, and global efforts to render neoliberal development commensurate with women's rights. My argument in chapter 4 is especially important in showing how neoliberal development interventions—like microfinance—were more continuous with other governmental logics, powers, and technologies, which they repurposed to new effect. Subjects of neoliberal government and development were, I show toward the end of the chapter, not passive; they offered not necessarily resistance but the demand to be governed differently. In turning to the subaltern subject who occupied a spectral position in metrocentric queer feminist imaginaries, chapter 4 shows how she constituted their material and not merely imaginative possibilities and limits and, in refusing the offer of rescue and rehabilitation, even propelled them to failure.

In exemplifying the irresolvable tensions of neoliberal feminist governmentality, it is the rural woman, as agent and not beneficiary of development, who most represents feminist failure and its ambivalent gifts. In chapter 5, I provide a fuller account of the subjectivities of those rural development workers who were brought into Janam's fold as volunteers rather than employees and who persisted despite a cruel kind of attachment to this feminist lifeworld. I show how they shaped the self in creative and wayward ways and turned, in both public and private, to conduct the self according to one's own norms. Their acts of embracing joy—in unproductive fun, new forms of conjugality, and middle-class and metropolitan consumptive

pleasures—fundamentally shift our imagination of what millennial Indian feminism can look like and be in the current neoliberal conjuncture.

The book's conclusion returns to the politics of telling feminist stories on and from the Global South. I recap the stories told in this book while also telling other, unfolding stories of feminist self- and life-making in times of unprecedented crisis. The historical present requires sharper forms of critique than those afforded by co-optation, but also care to sustain precarious queer feminist futures. I conclude by asking what it might mean to offer critique as a cultivated practice of care in ways to further expand rather than foreclose the transformatory potential of the kinds of feminist queer political practice that this book explores.

NOTES

Preface

1 The 1990s were a decade of rising communal tensions that culminated in the demolition in 1992 of the four-hundred-year-old Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The demolition was orchestrated by the Hindu Right–led Ramjanmabhoomi (Ram's birthplace) movement with the participation of members of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Large-scale communal riots followed the destruction of the mosque, particularly in Mumbai, under the stronghold of the local Hindu right-wing Shiv Sena. The period, and especially the events at Ayodhya, signaled a fundamental shift in the basic tenets and practices of Indian secularism.

Introduction

1 On the Delhi rape and the protests that ensued, see Baxi (2012a, 2012b); Dutta and Sircar (2013); Kapur (2013); Anupama Roy (2014); S. Roy (2014, 2016b); Roychowdhury (2013); and Shandilya (2015).

2 The largely urban-based postindependence IWM has a national profile and presence but cannot be thought—and does not claim—to represent all Indian women. Its history, internally contested nature, generational dynamics, and effects have produced a vast body of scholarship that this book engages with throughout, and most fully in chapter 1.

3 In this introduction and in chapter 1, I draw on interview data with feminist academics, activists, and NGO workers in Bangalore, Delhi, and Kolkata gathered in 2008–9. This constituted a pilot study that preceded the ethnography of SFE and Janam, whose members appear from chapter 2 onward.

4 Neither *feminist* nor *queer* are straightforward or stable terms in India; they are unpacked throughout this book. The long and complicated association of feminism with colonialism, Westernization, and elitism led early Indian activists, like others in the Global South, to reject the label altogether; for an overview

of this debate, see Chaudhuri (2004) and S. Roy (2012b). Younger women and queers are far more comfortable with self-identifying as feminist. Similarly, while the term *queer*—like *gay* and *lesbian*—is used with ease by certain individuals and (activist) communities, there have been concerns that nonmetropolitan, subaltern sexual minority groups cannot envision themselves or be understood as LGBTQ in the same way (see chapter 2).

5 My mobilization of governmentality draws principally from Foucault (Foucault 2008; Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988) and is helped by W. Brown (2015); Cruikshank (1999); Lemke (2001); Lorenzini (2018); Oksala (2013); and Rose (1999). On literature on South Asian governmentalities, see Agrawal (2005); P. Chatterjee (2004); A. Gupta (2012); Kalpagam (2019); Legg (2007, 2014); Legg and Heath (2018); Samaddar (2016); and A. Sharma (2008).

6 In thinking through the life of neoliberalism in the Global South, I have turned to Dosekun (2020); C. Freeman (2014, 2020); Gooptu (2013); Grewal (2005, 2017); Li (2007); Ong (2006); Peck (2013); Ananya Roy (2003); and A. Sharma (2008).

7 On NGO governmentality, see Bernal and Grewal (2014b); Grewal (2005); and Hodžić (2014).

8 "Shaping today's NGOs in India there lies a history of women's mobilisation that has flowed like a river through Indian modernity," writes Kalpana Ram (2008, 141). This is a history that can be discerned in contemporary NGO practice, such as the issues NGOs choose to prioritize, besides the highly embodied "readiness" that Ram finds in subaltern women to be trained or educated in a specific manner.

9 In a volume of essays I have edited with Alf Gunvald Nilsen, we use *subaltern* to move beyond the original deployment of the term in the field of subaltern studies to offer a more intersectional and relational account of subalternity (Nilsen and Roy 2015; see also Nilsen 2018).

10 Sangari (2007, 53) describes these changes to the IWM—in ways that echo some of the responses cited at the start of this introduction—as signaling a "shift away from mass-based political struggles, broader coalitions, and structural critique to neo-liberal modes of governance." For academic commentaries on issues of co-optation, generational shifts, and depoliticization of feminist politics within and beyond the context of the IWM, see Batliwala (2007); Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson (2008); Madhok and Rai (2012); Menon (2004); Mukhopadhyay (2016); Sunder Rajan (2003); and Wilson (2008). For more critical engagements with the idea of co-optation, see Dean (2010); De Jong and Kimm (2017); and Eschle and Maiguashca (2018). For my own work reflecting on and summarizing these debates with respect to India and South Asia, see S. Roy (2009, 2012a, 2015).

11 The idea of "feeling backward" (see Love 2007) will recur through the book, most centrally in chapter 2.

12 Mokkil (2019) turns to "lesbian hauntings" to show how loss and mourning—of actual Indian lesbian lives—offer an alternative and more locally grounded

politics of sexuality than liberal sexual identity politics. For similar readings of lesbian ghosts and hauntings, which draw on the foundational work of Avery Gordon (1997), see Hemmings and Eliot (2019), as well as my discussion in chapter 2.

13 Dalit (literally, "crushed," "ground down," and/or "broken to pieces") is a political category coined and embraced by the formerly untouchable castes and now defined as a Scheduled Caste in the Constitution of India.

14 Lefebvre (2018) convincingly employs Foucault's arguments around the care of the self to show that human rights, generally considered tools to care for vulnerable others and not one's own self, are in fact about self-care and personal transformation. For similar observations with respect to aid workers, see Malkki (2015); on human rights and LGBTQ activists, see Chua (2018).

15 For how neoliberal and postfeminist logics are presumed to be the preserve of white and Western girls alone, and mimetic of similar effects when they travel to distinct locations in the Global South (like Nigeria), see Dosekun (2020). Dosekun's book is part of a broader effort to explore these logics in more transnational and grounded ways while offering rich accounts of cultures of consumption, gendered neoliberalism, and postfeminist self-making. See also Iqani and Simões de Araújo (2021).

16 Eschle and Maiguashca (2018) counter—both conceptually and empirically—the prevailing tendency to erase actual instances of resistance to neoliberalism's dominance (in the writings of Nancy Fraser and other contemporary feminists). Dean (2010) also provides concrete evidence as to how the analytics of co-optation and depoliticization erase from view political—including feminist—resurgence in the United Kingdom.

17 It is no wonder that Foucault turned, in his thinking on neoliberalism, from perceiving power as conducting the self to how the self conducted itself in a relatively autonomous fashion, and thus he afforded a rich account of the self's relation to and care for the self. Some have argued that this turn to ethics of the care of the self shows Foucault's sympathy with neoliberalism. On this debate, see Lorenzini (2018).

18 Foucault's reflections on the practices of the care of the self—especially their inventive and transformative possibilities in constituting "a modern form of ascesis" (Halperin 1997, 78)—have been read into feminist and queer politics, ethics, and selves, including in specific postcolonial locales; see, for instance, Dave (2012); C. Freeman (2014); Livermon (2020); Mahmood (2005); Najmabadi (2014); and Nuttall (2009). I have also benefited from commentaries on the care of the self by the following feminist philosophers: Heyes (2007, 2020); McLaren (2002, 2004); Mitcheson (2012); Oksala (2013); and Taylor and Vintges (2004).

19 *Governing*, rather than *fashioning* or *making*, grasps more fully, I believe, the nonvoluntarist sense of this model of individual agency, or how "the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion [though] these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself" (Foucault 1997a, 291).

On Foucault's technologies of the self as offering agency, but not of a voluntarist kind, see Lorenzini (2016); and Mitcheson (2012).

20 In showing the limits of Marxist feminist critiques of neoliberalism, Oksala (2013, 44) similarly argues that "we also need a politics of ourselves that acknowledges that it is through us, our subjectivity that neoliberal governmentality is able to function."

21 On this point, see Lefebvre (2018); and McLaren (2002, 2004). The self and the collective are not, in any case, so easily disentangled from each other; as Chandra and Majumder (2013, 7) note, "anthropological studies of these micro-practices cannot simply be read via narrow empiricist lenses as simply individuation or monolithically as subject-formation, but as emblems of wider social transformations … micro-practices of the 'self' and 'self-making' are key sites to study the workings of theoretical abstractions such as power, capital, culture, and gender."

22 Gooptu (2016), who maps the neoliberal reshaping of individual subjectivity on a range of sites (from retail to religious and spiritual), locates this limitation in the more general lack of attention to the politics of the self and self-making in India—a limitation to which Indian feminists have contributed their fair share, as I show in chapter 1. Glover (2021, 2) observes the same of the Caribbean, where individual actions are evaluated not on their own terms but "through the prism of communal politics," with Black women primed to fulfill social expectations of self-sacrifice and solidarity.

23 As Glover (2021, 2) notes, self-making "do[es] not plainly generate or gesture toward programs or possibilities for political change."

24 See Rao's (2014) wonderful piece on how the "Woman and Homosexual Question" had "intertwined trajectories" in (post)colonial India; he shows how questions around gender and sexuality are both posed and disrupted by feminist, queer, and transgender politics. For historical detail on how caste, gender, and sexuality operated in mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive ways, see Mitra (2020).

25 I refer here to the state-commissioned report titled *Towards Equality*, published in 1971, that contributed (together with the Indian state of emergency in the 1970s) to a weakening of the IWM's nationalist aspirations. In generational accounts of the IWM, the 1950s and 1960s are characterized as a silent period that saw great feminist faith in the emancipatory potential of the state.

26 Especially in this "second wave," the IWM took two organizational forms: affiliated and autonomous women's groups. The former referred to women's wings of political (usually left-wing) parties, while the latter were structurally and ideologically autonomous from political parties. On these feminist formations and reflections on autonomy, see Gandhi and Shah (1991), Kumar (1993), and R. Ray (1999); for further evaluation, see M. Desai (2016) and S. Roy (2015).

27 This is not to suggest that subaltern women did not have political agency of their own or did not speak or act on their own behalf; this is evidenced by a long history of collective action, whether to do with gender-specific issues or

not (see Kumar 1993). In West Bengal alone there is robust mapping of the participation of rural, Adivasi, lower-caste, and working-class women in land and labor struggles; for a good overview, see Sinha Roy (2011).

28 Masjid refers to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, which engulfed parts of the country in communal riots and significantly eroded the secular edifice of the republic. Mandal is short for the Mandal Commission recommendations, announced under the government of V. P. Singh, "for reservations of 27% for backward castes, apart from 22.5% for SC/STs [Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes] in government service and public sector jobs" (Tharu and Niranjana 1994, 97). It sparked a major backlash from the upper castes, including dramatic acts of self-immolation by student protestors fearing unemployment. Upper-caste women protestors pitted themselves against lower-caste men, thereby making clear their caste-based allegiances and dependency on forms of Brahmanical patriarchy (Arya and Rathore 2020; Tharu and Niranjana 1994).

29 For a posing of this question in the context of this period, see Menon (2004). The beginnings of this question can, however, be traced to *Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum*, the iconic pedagogical moment in the 1980s when the rights of an individual (female) minority subject came into sharp conflict with collective rights, and feminists found themselves on the side of conservative political forces. Shah Bano, a divorced Muslim woman, sought alimony from the Supreme Court of India, while her ex-husband argued that he was not obliged to pay her, per Muslim personal law. While the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Shah Bano, the Rajiv Gandhi–led Indian National Congress Party government passed what later became a law—the Defense of Muslim Women's Act of 1986, commonly known as the Shah Bano Act—which overturned the Supreme Court ruling and removed Muslim women from the right to maintenance. The rising BJP took this opportunity to call out the Congress Party's appeasement of religious minorities and shore up its own feminist credentials by supporting a uniform civil code for all women, regardless of their religion. In 2019, at the same time as Muslim men were being hounded and lynched by right-wing Hindu nationalists, the BJP government under Modi criminalized "instant triple talaq" divorces to show its deep commitment to the protection of Muslim women. On the *Shah Bano* case, see Sunder Rajan (2003).

30 Class analysis has been central to critical queer organizing and scholarship (though less ethnographically mined in the case of queer Indian women). For a good overview and extension of existing arguments, see Khubchandani (2020).

31 Chandra, Heierstad, and Nielsen (2016) argue against such exceptionalism, especially in how it made caste appear irrelevant to local politics, a position replicated in scholarly work.

32 The idea of Sonar Bangla was core to Bengali nationalism, "developed by a host of predominantly Calcutta-based Bengali nationalist writers since the 1880s" (Nielsen 2018, 42). The song "Amar Sonar Bangla," written by Rabindranath

Tagore at the time of the first partition of Bengal, became the national anthem of Bangladesh.

33 While there is a long history of valorizing the peasant in nationalist and left-wing rhetoric, the Left Front instrumentalized this figure to constitute a myth of peasant unity and bolster its claims toward rural progress (while masking its failings toward the urban poor). The "stickiness" (Ahmed 2014a) of this figure has endured in postcommunist politics, from the anti-industrial movements at Singur to development projects and even shaping the queer feminist politics that I uncover in this book (see chapter 2).

34 There is a vast literature on the Left's rural reformism, and I have benefited from analyses by A. Basu (1992); Nielsen (2018); Ananya Roy (2003); and Ruud (2003).

35 The solidly upper-caste, elite communist leadership of the state thought caste, in comparison to class, was of little relevance, exemplified in one leader's proclamation that there were only two castes in Bengal: the rich and the poor (Mukherjee 2019).

36 Note, however, the long history of lower-caste struggle, as documented by Bandyopadhyay (2011). See also Chandra, Heierstad, and Nielsen (2016).

37 While the Left Front's greatest achievement (besides land reform) was the maintenance of communal harmony (Tenhunen and Säävälä 2012), the 2006 report on the socioeconomic conditions of Indian Muslims by the Sachar Committee, headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar, revealed that Muslims in left-ruled Bengal were worse off on every count than their counterparts in most other states (Paul 2010).

38 The government, including the chief minister, Banerjee, has resorted to blaming victims while linking rapes to sexual permissiveness under globalization and urbanization. Boyce (2014, 1211) also shows the concrete implications of the Trinamool Congress for sexual rights organizing in the state given moves to cut funding for community-based NGOs for HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual rights work.

39 During the thirty-four-year reign of the CPM, the terrain of the local women's movement was dominated by its women's wing, the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti (PBGMS). With a membership of two million women in 1990, its reach was unparalleled, largely due to its "piggybacking on the strength" of the party (R. Ray 1999, 54). City-based autonomous women's organizations—some of which later became NGOs—were unable to compete with a mass-based organization of this sort (Datta 2009) and remained skeptical of its feminist claims. The peculiarity of the West Bengal political scene is, of course, that these oppositional forces were themselves embedded in the same leftist field (R. Ray 1999). This book, in turn, shows how even as the official dominance of the CPM and the PBGMS has waned, leftist ideologies, cultures, and affects hold firm and inform feminist and queer feminist NGOs, as it did the autonomous feminist activists of a previous generation. Even today, NGOs, political parties, and other civil society organizations come together on only

some rare issues and occasions (like during the Singur movement; see Nielsen 2018).

40 The Naxalbari *andolan*, which began as a peasant revolt but had a significant urban dimension, played a critical role in consolidating the dominance of the Left in West Bengal. It is also considered a predecessor to the new social movements that emerged after the Indian emergency had been lifted in 1977, by which time many of its activists ("Naxalites") had been killed or arrested.

41 Leftist suspicion of "foreign funds" were related to concerns around imperial domination and the erosion of national sovereignty (which explains the belated boom in NGOs in Kolkata, in comparison to other parts of the country). In discussing the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Armstrong (2004, 41) reveals an alternative model of women's organizing that draws on a pool of members. She rightly argues against pitting funded and unfunded politics against each other, noting instead how "no politics, however populist, informal or momentary, can wholly evade the complex range of problems raised by the increasing privatization of activism. Neither fiscal purity nor simply defined autonomy fully circumvents the processes of globalization that folds organizations that fight for social change into the logic of capital." Even though AIDWA presents itself as independent of the two leading communist parties, it is generally perceived as their women's front: "[It] could not seriously challenge the male-dominated top leadership [of the mainstream communist parties]. Women's entry to the top decision-making bodies of the democratic communist movement is still a rarity" (Sinha Roy 2011, 29).

42 There is a rich body of feminist literature on sex worker struggles in liberalized India that also considers tensions around sex work within the IWM (Devika 2016; Kapur 2005; Kotiswaran 2011; Lakkimsetti 2020; Menon 2007a; Mokkil 2019; S. P. Shah 2012; Sukthankar 2012; and Vijayakumar 2021).

43 Depicting a love affair between two sisters-in-law in a traditional Hindu joint family, *Fire* was made by a Canadian Indian, Deepa Mehta. Labeling the film as alien to Indian culture and as insulting Hindu religion, right-wing political groups vandalized cinema halls screening the film and called for it to be banned.

44 Some of these later interviews with transgender feminist activists were conducted by a research assistant who identified as a queer woman and was involved in feminist and transgender organizing in the city.

45 I present as a cisgender woman, and heteronormative in ways that were never questioned by my queer interlocutors. In those early days, and as evident in SFE's discussions on sexual identity (see chapter 2), the use of self-descriptors like *queer* were merely emergent on this terrain. In subsequent years I have come to align more consciously with this category and the communities it hails, for the potentialities that bell hooks (2014) identifies when she defines queerness as not belonging, as being at odds with everything, and as signaling an alternative kind of thriving (even as such usage might constitute its own kind of "postured privilege"; Ballakrishnen 2021, 194).