



Book Review

Behl, Natasha. *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*. Oxford University Press, 2019. (184 pages, ISBN: 9780190949426)

Natasha Behl's *Gendered Citizenship* is a fresh and rich contribution to the emerging literature of gender studies. She focuses on the gender-aspect of the concept of citizenship, especially in the context of Indian democracy. She juxtaposes the high claims of democracy of the Indian state with the local realities of culture, religion, and caste system. Beginning with a cold-blooded incident of rape of a young woman traveling on a local bus, Behl employs the ethnographic methodological approach to demonstrate the lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and self-reflexivity of women in the public spheres of the country. She critiques the so-called liberal claims of Indian democracy, where gender based violence and exclusion of women is widespread. She points out that although Indian women are visible on different public forums and institutions, but they are always faced with the included-exclusion dilemma.

Behl argues that conventional understanding of citizenship and democracy cannot help much to define and understand the pervasive gender violence in either public or private sphere. She exemplifies it by pointing to the theoretical and methodological blind spots in the mainstream political science scholarship that have only led to the reproduction of gender blindness and legitimization of gender violence. On her part then she takes a different line of understanding by rendering a critical analysis of sexual violence law and an in-depth ethnography of the Sikh community. Accordingly, she explores the contradictory nature of the claims of Indian democracy, and argues that it has gravely affected its institutions, sometimes marginalized its citizens, and put their lives at risk.

One of the most interesting aspects of Behl's book is discussed in the second chapter; she upends longstanding academic assumptions

about democracy, citizenship, religion, and gender in Indian democracy. She responds to a gap in the citizenship literature by developing a framework of situated citizenship, which facilitates empirical analysis of exclusionary inclusion in different contexts. Therefore, she explains that situated citizenship establishes the truth that citizenship is more than a fixed legal status; it is also a situated social relation. The concept explains how uneven and unequal experiences are created, maintained and challenged in the private and public spheres through social practices often compounded by gender, caste, class, religion and nation. She mentions that situated citizenship and exclusionary inclusion can be applied to lived-experiences of unequal democracy in any part of the world, but especially the gender-based experiences of unequal democracy in India. She further elucidates in chapter three that how state and formal legal equality can operate in the form of undemocratic and exclusionary methods. She shows that the mechanism of exclusionary inclusion operates at state, civil society, religious community and home levels, thus relegating women to the status of second-class citizen.

In chapter five, she discusses that unlike prevailing academic understandings on the relationship between secular state (democratic) and religious communities (undemocratic) in India, some religious spaces and practices can be sites for renegotiating democratic participation, and uncovers how some women engage in religious community in unexpected ways to link gender equality and religious freedom as shared goals. Therefore, through ethnographic study of Sikh community, she underscores that religious communities can be resource for women's active citizenship and can resist their exclusionary inclusion. The detailed ethnographic evidence of Sikh women and their experiences in religious practices and spaces establishes that religion is not as oppressive as perceived by many scholars. She also shows that the experiences of western liberal democracies and citizenship are different from developing countries like India. A situated approach to citizenship establishes and uncovers that some women actively engage in religious activities in quite surprising ways and thus try to create egalitarian gender relations. The book also contributes to the study of women's agency in religious and devotional organizations as well.

It challenges the conventional understanding of devout and religious women as either powerful or oppressed.

Behl takes up the case of Sikh community due to certain interesting reasons. For example, Sikhs believe that their faith and community practices are free of gender- and caste-based distinction and discrimination. Even though, in fact, in the present day India, Sikhs have much in common of their religious and cultural practices with other communities. She takes Sikhs as a minority community that provides an insight into the challenges of gender inequality in the democratic state of India plagued with gender discrimination, caste system, classes, tribes, and linguistic issues. The case of Sikh community also highlights the tensions between state and religious community, the majority and minority religions, and tensions among state, community and gender. Above all, the Sikh community provides examples of lived experience of gender inequality, which provide reflection on women's conflicting experience of sense of belonging in the state. In her final chapters, she tries to address how one minority religious community in India both uphold exclusionary inclusion and tries to resist it. By employing in-depth interviews and participant observation, Behl highlights how Sikh women struggle to escape the gendered norms, religiosity, and the discourse of purity, pollutedness, and inferiority by associating themselves with devotional organizations such as Sukhmani Seva Society. In this way they try to enact their citizenship rights through their religious commitments. She thinks that Sikh women participation in such religious associations can educate scholars and civil society activists about the present impasse in the discourse related to state, religious community and gender in India.

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