

Citizenship and Women's Agency On the Responsibility of Calibration

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Natasha Behl's crisp volume, *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*, seeks to contribute to the discussion on women's religious collectivisation and citizenship in the context of Punjab. The central focus in the book is on women's unequal experience of citizenship and their attempts to negotiate with this inequality. Behl seeks to establish a "line of sight" on sexual- and gender-based violence (sGBV) of varying intensities, ranging from the heinous sexual assault and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi in 2012 to the constraints on women's religious practice gleaned also through the author's own experience in Punjab. The book argues that while such

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violence may not appear comparable in terms of their intensities, there exists a common logic, of denying women full democratic participation in public spaces, that is at play in each of these instances, rendering citizenship an incomplete or even risky project for all women in India. Behl advances the framework of "situated citizenship" to explicate the gap that exists between the formal imagination and actual existence of citizenship, and terms the lived reality that results from such situatedness as "exclusionary inclusion."

Organised into six chapters, the volume seeks to integrate some debates on the failed promise of citizenship for marginalised sections, on the lacunae within mainstream political science in understanding the everyday operation of citizenship, and on women's agency in dealing with constraints imposed by the state as well as the community. The first two chapters establish the conceptual and methodological backdrop of the study, wherein the author makes a case for situated citizenship as a methodological approach to overcome the gender blindness of mainstream literature on citizenship and democratisation. Chapter 3 reviews some literature on the relationship between the state, law, and religion in India and points out how women's bodies have often been the sites of this contest. The chapter provides an overview of the rape and murder of Singh in 2012 and examines state and judicial responses to it. It also carries the responses of some legislators and office bearers of certain political parties to the incident,

which highlight rampant patriarchy. By using these to establish the failure of legislative and constitutional mechanisms to ensure women's freedom, Behl advances the case for examining religion as a site of potential democracy for women.

Chapters 4 and 5 carry forward this attempt through ethnographic fieldwork carried out over a decade. The chapter documents Sikh respondents' attitudes to the state, secularism, and gender rights as well as three Sikh women's attempts to carve out a space of public religiosity through the establishment of women's devotional groups within a patriarchal religious organisation.

Behl makes a case for considering Sikh women's religious organisation as an attempt on their part at claiming their right to public participation, and in so doing advancing the republican take on participatory democracy and citizenship. She also points out that such participation is by nature a contradictory process in which women simultaneously breach and embrace various patriarchal norms, as action of this kind is not of the nature of struggle, but of the nature of negotiation. The final chapter summarises conclusions of the preceding chapters and provides an autobiographical entry point into the main question. The author notes how her examination of the relationship between women's bodies and public places, and of citizenship which in a sense mediates the two, was sharpened by her experience at her grandmother's funeral, where she was denied entry into the cremation site as she was a woman. Behl highlights the value of autoethnographic approaches in uncovering aspects of lived citizenship which mainstream political science refuses to engage with, and challenges the discipline to adopt newer approaches to knowledge production. The bold juxtaposition of contexts and the passionate call for methodological reorientation render the book a provocative fervour.

Formal and Substantive Democracy

The persistence of inequalities in democracy, despite the existence of constitutional guarantees, is not a contradiction specific to the Indian scenario. Neither is

it a new or unacknowledged contradiction within the writing (or social action) on this theme. That it appears further cleaved along the lines of inequality relevant to national contexts (class, race, caste, gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on) is also not a new intervention. Thus, the deployment of the frameworks of "situated citizenship" and "exclusionary inclusion" is at best a signifier of the existing discussion and political practice on the distance between formal and substantive equality in the domain of citizenship.

In light of the above, the niche carved out for the book is at best responsive to the purported gaps within "mainstream" political science in the United States (us), and is not reflective of the ebb and tide of social science writing within India on the themes of citizenship, democratisation, secularism, or religion. Behl argues that mainstream political science has treated citizenship within the liberal democratic framework as exhaustive of all possibilities of equality by reducing it to a legal status. The author is perhaps writing for an audience primarily located in the us. It is only fair, however, to expect a book about Indian realities to reflect some of the debates central to such characterisation that exist in India. The result of this absence is a comfortable, single-brushstroke picture of Indian democracy, secularism, religion, and gender, obliterating decades of nuanced scholarship:

prevailing academic understandings of the relationship between secular state and religious community in India often assume that state-citizen relations are democratic and religious relations are nondemocratic. When it comes to gender, scholars often assume that the liberal democratic state protects women through law as equal citizens, while religious communities subordinate women through traditional practice as unequal members. (p 6)

At least on the count of the limited promise of liberal democracy, one almost anticipates the acknowledgement of this debate within India, starting with the trenchant suspicions of the very framer of the Indian Constitution, only to be alarmed by its absence in the lengthy discussion on the conceptual backdrop. That B R Ambedkar resigned in protest of the same intervention of

religion in granting property rights to Hindu women does not even merit a footnote in complicating the Indian debates on women, religion, and citizenship. Even if we move on to the republican understanding of citizenship and focus on public participation as the key to democratisation, the debates on civil society organisation in India and the vast body of writing (recent and past) on its possibilities and constraints do not find even a cursory mention in the book.¹

Indian Model of Secularism

Debates on what constitutes secularism in the Indian context, a theme that occupied much of the imagination and energy of Indian social scientists post the Shah Bano case and the demolition of the Babri Masjid,² the variety of models scholars have attributed to secularism in practice in India, and its limitations and potential, have all been reduced to the debate on the uniform civil code (ucc). The basic distinction in the models of secularism adopted by the us and India goes unacknowledged, leading to a misrepresentation of the idea in its barest constitutional form. Romila Thapar (2013) has argued that antecedents of secular thought in India lie within the Bhakti and Sufi traditions, which elevated the individual (as opposed to community) and devotion (as opposed to ritual worship) as relevant categories of spiritual emancipation, in contrast with the orthodoxy of Brahminism. The extremely complex debate on the relationship between religion and women, with its ramifications extending to matters as vast as caste endogamy, partition, and Hindu fundamentalism, has been reduced to the idea that religion is conventionally seen as an undemocratic site for gender freedoms. Despite the author's disavowal of colonial characterisations of the state, the "third world" state renders itself rather easily into "unevenness" in the narrative. When the question refuses to be about the nature of the state as an institution in its ability to emancipate, and insists on being about third world states or the Indian state in particular, Behl unfortunately succumbs to some of the very tendencies she intends to guard against. The absence of any comparative

insight about the state in her own context and its treatment of women (not just women of colour) adds to the narrowness of the perspective. Instead of characterising streams of literature representing various tendencies in argument, the book chooses easy dichotomies and oppositions, establishing in the process several unidimensional caricatures of scholarly work in, from and about India.

Another prominent (yet incorrect) assertion is that academic thinking on religious organisation has universally considered it undemocratic. A plethora of scholars located across the social sciences in India have examined the limits and possibilities of religious organisation in India, refusing to eulogise them as revolutionary while acknowledging the limited challenges they offered to existing hierarchies of their times.³ Several others have also pointed to problematic aspects of such mobilisation and its interplay with global flows of capital.⁴ As soon as one moves away from the comfort of liberal theorisation, religion, like the state, is apparent as a form of congealed structural inequalities. Insofar as its existence in society is governed by institutional arrangements that are unequal, there is always potential for subversion, negotiation, change as well as further exploitation. Such potential has been identified and mobilised for various ends by movements beginning with Buddhism, ranging through Bhakti and Sufi traditions, and several new religious movements (NRMs). There are imaginations of democracy, equality, and individualism within each of them. However, it is important not to confuse such mobilisation as providing an alternative site to the freedoms guaranteed by citizenship, which is a unique historical-political category.

How the Marginalised Negotiate?

Do marginalised groups see alternative sites of citizenship like community or religion as replacing the formal constitutional promise? There is always a strategic acknowledgement of temporal authority in providing legitimacy to equality claims among marginalised groups, even if they may not think of such authority as unproblematic or egalitarian.

Examples are the continuing mass mobilisation for temple entry by Dalits in several parts of the country, or the fight for the entry of women into the Sabarimala temple. These are significant not because these communities crave self-actualisation or see Hinduism as an egalitarian religion, but because they see a distinctly political element to the struggle. Ronki Ram's writing on Dalit Sikhs has pointed out the distinctly political and iconoclastic character of Dalit mobilisation through *deras* (Ram 2004, 2008). The resolution of inequality in all these cases, and several others, is imagined as impossible without relying on the constitutional promise of citizenship, and legal battles associated with it, in addition to social transformations of various kinds.

Citizenship is itself a status won after arduous struggle, and is, in fact, an ongoing one. Most contemporary mobilisations to prevent the erosion of this status acknowledge citizenship—the very existence of a political framework imagined in the language of rights—as an unprecedented equality claim, particularly in the feudal context of caste-ridden India. Vibrant movements of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes hark back to the legacy of Ambedkar in its totality—he drafted the Constitution and subsequently converted to Buddhism—precisely because they see the necessity of assertion on both constitutional and extra-constitutional grounds to enliven all possibilities of democracy. The either/or approach to the problem seems to be an academic phenomenon, absent in mobilisation around the theme. All these actors understand that the state or the judiciary are not completely egalitarian institutions. That does not, however, lead them into abandoning these as sites of struggle in exclusive pursuit of alternative sites of liberatory politics. It is useful to remember that the framework of citizenship is dynamic, and popular movements, including feminist ones, have often successfully intervened in widening its ambit. The analysis provides a dynamic view of authority structures in their ability to morph and congeal across formal and informal distinctions, but fails to accord

such dynamism to the relationship between citizens and the state.

While fieldwork centrally engages with the theme of women's religious collectivisation, the book does not present any analysis of the writing on the diverse forms of women's collectivisation in India or the history of women's attempts to claim public spaces through religion or otherwise.⁵ I cite two starkly different examples to depict the complexity of this theme. One coherent body of writing on the theme in India has examined community-level mobilisation of Hindu women through devotional as well as martial groups, and their assimilation and active participation in the Hindu Rashtra project.⁶ Another has identified women as active participants in the self-respect movement in Tamil Nadu, founded on the principles of rationalism.⁷ Thus, the relationship between women's collectivisation and public participation, or their imagination of its contribution to citizenship, even when restricted to questions of faith, cannot be reduced to any homogeneous character.

SGBV: Dangers of Appropriation

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, central to the book is the extremely tenuous juxtaposition of the gang rape and murder of Singh in Delhi in 2012 with the constraints on public religious participation of Sikh women (instanced by the author's own experience of being denied the opportunity to attend her grandmother's funeral).

I put my experience in direct relation with the gang rape case and with the findings from the Sikh community to call attention to the dangers of SGBV, from its most extraordinary and horrific expression to the more commonplace and mundane expression in daily life. (pp 114–115)

While Behl repeatedly states that she has no intentions of flattening the difference between these varied forms of SGBV, the necessity of this juxtaposition to make a general case for the distance between formal and substantive democracy for women is spectacularly unclear, and borders on sensationalist. If, as Behl claims, she writes because she does not consider gendered violence as an abstract

concept but a lived embodied experience, the least that is expected is the responsibility to acknowledge the gulfs of difference that separate the visceral physical annihilation of Singh from her own experience of unfreedom before writing, "I too am a victim" (p 122).

Addressing the gap between the formal and the substantive is among the central tasks of any progressive social science. Since the repetitiveness of this task reflects the persistence of powerful social structures, novelty of argument is not necessarily a premium demand on scholars who document and characterise its forms and counters to it. However, in inheriting this legacy and seeking to document emergent lacunae between what ought to be and what is, it is important to not lose sight of specificities and succumb to tempting generalisations. More importantly, in seeking to identify how disenfranchised communities deal with these constraints, it is vital to not jump to conclusions about their priorities and to not confuse explanation with prescription. It is perhaps relevant in the context of "first world" academics writing on the "third world" that data is "cogenerated;" it is, however, misleading when theory is not.

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NOTES

- 1 See Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001), Elliot (2003), Chatterjee (2004), Chandhoke (2011), Gudavorthy (2012, 2013), for some examples.
- 2 See Bhargava (1998), Chandhoke (1999), Srinivasan (2007), Sunderrajan and Needham (2007) for some examples. Sunderrajan's position finds place in the book, yet the diversity of perspectives presented in a volume co-edited by her is absent.
- 3 See O'Connell (2003), Dube (1998), Thapar (2013) and Chandramohan (2016) for an outline of this discussion.
- 4 See Mayaram (2004) and Sehgal (2007) for two empirical discussions.
- 5 See Sinclair Brull (1997) for a specific discussion of this relationship.
- 6 This branch of writing has been vibrant in the past two decades, with important contributions from Sarkar (1999), Sehgal (2007), Sen (2008), Parashar (2010), and Govinda (2013).
- 7 For a brief introduction, see Anandi (1991), Geetha (1998), Vijaya (1993).

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