



## Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India

by Natasha Behl, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 184 pp., \$74.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780190949426

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India**, by Natasha Behl, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 184 pp., \$74.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780190949426

Natasha Behl's *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India* opens with the horrifying story of Jyoti Singh, a 23-year-old student who was brutally raped and beaten by a group of men on a Delhi bus on December 16, 2012. A few weeks later, Singh died from massive internal injuries, sparking a national debate about gender-based violence that illuminated a "tragic contradiction in Indian democracy" (2). That is, despite a constitution committed to gender and caste equality, pervasive gender-based discrimination and violence in India has limited women's access to the public spaces required to support that democracy.

Behl argues that conventional understandings of democratic citizenship are insufficient for understanding this paradox because they emphasize formal, legal measures and assume that citizenship activities occur in public, through free and voluntary associations. Instead, Behl proposes "situated citizenship" as a general theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing the uneven and contradictory experiences of Indian democracy. By understanding citizenship as a situated social relation instead of a fixed legal status, this framework draws our attention to the ways in which embodied, local, lived daily experiences shape women's standing as members of, and participants in, their communities and democracy more broadly. Here, Behl proposes the notion of "exclusionary inclusion" in reference to the range of legal, ideological, material, and embodied practices that limit membership in different spheres of life and reinforce unequal democratic experiences while also, potentially, renegotiating and even challenging these practices.

Drawing from feminist and other critical citizenship scholarship and using interpretive methods (outlined in Chapter 2) to analyze the data she collected through extensive participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of the Sikh community in India, Behl's situated study shows how the state and formal legal equality often operate in undemocratic and exclusionary ways, while religious communities offer a surprising space for women's active citizenship, where they may resist exclusionary inclusion. To illustrate these findings, Chapter 3 outlines "the tensions between the ostensibly secular Indian state and majority and minority religious communities" (36) to show how women's bodies, rights, and mobility are entangled within these. Following this, the chapter discusses the political and legal debates surrounding Singh's gang rape, which offered both a progressive political opening and a retrenchment of patriarchal norms, thereby illustrating the Indian state's radical promise of equality and its failure to achieve it. The chapter concludes by discussing the Sikh minority community, outlining the inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics therein.

Chapter 4 then applies a situated approach to citizenship in an effort to understand "the lived experience of Sikh women in civil society and in the home" (57). Behl's interview data indicates how women's exclusionary inclusion is naturalized through public policies and the following unwritten and informal rules: women's rights and duties, religiosity, purity, and position as perpetual outsiders. By exploring the contradictions between interviewees' claims to gender equality and their sexist behaviors and beliefs, Behl shows that women's experiences of inclusion in civil society and the home are partial and uneven at best, all of which challenge the notion that India is a model democracy.

Chapter 5 turns to Sikh women's experiences in Sukhmani Seva Societies, the devotional religious organizations open to men and women that promote the recitation of prayers at the grassroots level in Punjab and throughout India. Many scholars have long assumed that strong religious ties are antithetical to modern citizenship and undermine feminist struggles for gender equality. However, Behl's ethnographic analysis indicates that Sikh women's participation in these devotional

organizations both upholds and resists exclusionary inclusion. Even as they face (and enact) conflicting gender norms, membership in these devotional organizations provides many women with resources for active citizenship, where they may resist socially prescribed gender roles and discriminatory gender norms.

In conclusion, Chapter 6 returns to the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh, which Behl reanalyzes in light of her findings. Behl also discusses the implications of her research for studies of democracy and citizenship more broadly, and she offers a critical reflection on her position as a diasporic researcher, discussing here issues of data co-construction and the blind spots that emerged in the research process.

*Gendered Citizenship* makes a number of important scholarly contributions. First, at a time when political science is rightly criticized for being overly quantitative, technical, and detached from lived political struggles, Behl's extensive participatory, interview-based research adds to a growing body of scholarship in the discipline that is community-based and attentive to the lives of real people on the ground. Second, by using qualitative-interpretive methods of data collection and analysis, Behl found that democratic citizenship is often a highly gendered and uneven experience. While there exists an expansive body of gender and politics scholarship in political science, the discipline's mainstream still often regards gender as a "special interest" topic as opposed to a central element of political analysis. In light of this, Behl's work is important not only for centering gender, but for challenging political scientists' reliance on Western-centric formal legal mechanisms and quantitative indicators when measuring and assessing democratic citizenship.

A major strength of Behl's work is her attention to her participants' situated experiences; however, as I read the book, I wondered whether and how these experiences shaped their efforts to demand broader social change, if at all. For example, does women's work with their devotional societies translate to more engagement with protest movements? Here, I would like to suggest that more engagement with scholarship on social movements could help us better understand this relationship.

In fact, as I was reading Behl's book, I was routinely reminded of Mary Katzenstein's *Faithful and Fearless* (Princeton University Press, 1999), which illustrated how women in the Catholic Church and US military variously demanded change from within these institutions. Particularly within the church, Katzenstein argues that women used discursive protests to challenge their subordination and rethink faith and justice. Certainly, the Catholic Church in the United States and Sikh devotional societies in India are very different religious and institutional contexts. But what Behl's work shares with Katzenstein's is the important insight that civic engagement and social movement scholars must expand their inquiry beyond highly visible protests and other acts of civic participation to recognize how women develop solidarities and identities within religious communities and, in so doing, confront power and authority in ways that may not be immediately recognizable.

As a thoughtful piece of qualitative-interpretive scholarship, Behl's *Gendered Citizenship* is recommended reading for scholars of citizenship, religion, feminism, and Indian politics, especially at a time when Jyoti Singh's gang rape has returned to the news. On March 19, 2020, multiple media sources reported that the state executed the four men convicted for Singh's rape and murder. Feminist advocates, political leaders, and members of the public have already begun to debate whether this marks a turning point in India's struggles to address gender-based violence and discrimination. As these debates continue, Behl's research will help us understand how and why formal promises of equality are not often realized, while also offering a framework and method for better understanding why this may be the case.

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