

BOOK REVIEW

Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India

By Natasha Behl. Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 168 pp. \$78 (Cloth).

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Natasha Behl's *Gendered Citizenship* highlights the paradox between promises of the Indian constitution and the lived experience of women in India's democracy, which is animated by their constant vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The book opens with an account of the brutal gang rape and murder of a young woman in 2012 in New Delhi, India. Nationwide public protests demanded justice and pointed at the Indian state's failure to provide safety for women. The central government appointed a judicial commission to amend laws for dealing strictly with cases of sexual violence against women, in addition to the constitutional guarantee of gender equality in the country. However, the number of rapes and cases of SGBV in India has not declined, and it remains one of the most unsafe places in the world for women.

Against this backdrop, Behl begins by asking "Why do we find pervasive gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence in India when the Indian constitution builds an inclusive democracy committed to gender and caste equality?" (p. 2)

Gendered Citizenship contributes to existing literature that analyzes the reasons for the increasing gendered-based violence in India, but is distinct, as it advances a theoretical and methodological framework that Behl describes as "Situated Citizenship." This framework pushes for an intersectional and embodied approach to understand citizenship, exploring the manner in which norms, or informal rules, impacts citizens' right to formal equality. Drawn from critical feminist scholarship, this framework questions the power relations affecting citizen's standing as members and participants in their communities. Although Behl studies gender-based unevenness in India, this framework can also be used to highlight unequal experiences of racial and ethnic groups in different geographical locations all over the world.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Behl argues that the conventional approach of measuring gender equality through institutional indicators and formal laws leads to an

incomplete analysis of the status of women as citizens in Indian democracy. Behl finds “citizenship,” traditionally defined as a narrow legal status, problematic. She points out that all citizens of India, especially women, do not uniformly enjoy equality that is guaranteed by the legal status. Understanding citizenship in such a manner creates gender blindness in democratization scholarship and leads to a single-dimensional measurement of women’s inclusion and participation.

She demonstrates the existence of unequal power relations, the boundaries of exclusion, and the forms of marginalization that women experience in the Sikh religious community. She characterizes them as contradictions to their experience as equal citizens, as is formally guaranteed in the constitution of India. In her framework, for methodological purposes, she defines these contradictions as “exclusionary inclusion,” experienced at various levels of society.

In Chapter 3, she presents an analysis of the political debate which took place after the 2012 incidence of sexual violence. Behl argues that the appointment of the judicial commission to amend laws was an opportunity to address deep-rooted patriarchy in Indian society. However, it did not translate into a progressive change. After pointing out the failure of legal remedies to eradicate gender equality, Behl suggests exploring other potential sites for creating gender equality.

Behl’s ethnographic research in the Sikh community of the northern state of Punjab highlights the presence of SGBV (similar to the case in New Delhi) within Sikh women’s daily lived experience, albeit in different forms and expressions. Behl demonstrates that Sikh men and women define the category of “women” in a way that limits them to the private sphere of home and family. However, Sikh women navigate and resist exclusionary practices through their participation in their religious community. She demonstrates that religious communities may not always be oppressive and can, in a limited fashion, provide women with opportunities to gain access to public religious space and civil society.

Behl describes how the Sikh religion was based upon the principle of egalitarianism at the time of its birth and later on caste-based distinctions that emerged within the religion. As she discusses her research participants, Behl identifies the different upper castes, such as the Khatri and Jats. However, this specific distinction is perhaps missing in her reference to scheduled castes (regarded as socially disadvantaged former untouchables or Dalits and backward castes identified by the Indian state for providing benefits), presenting a danger of considering scheduled caste as a homogeneous category. In reality, they remain politically, socially, and economically divided. There is an evident class difference within these scheduled caste communities who are separated by caste and social status, many of them residing on the outskirts of the village.

Although Behl talks about creating a “category of women,” it is crucial to explore how women, resisting exclusion by participating in religious organizations, create or address this caste and class divide. Recognition of this critical division within scheduled caste is essential for many scheduled caste women, who are vulnerable to incidents of sexual and caste-based violence.

Gender Citizenship is an essential addition to the literature dedicated to explaining and eradicating the causes and consequences of SGBV in the broader South Asian context. This study brings at the center an analysis of the impact of unwritten

rules and social norms on public policies, social reforms, and status of women and its impact on women's unequal experiences of the Indian democracy. It is a useful resource for those looking to analyze women's participation and agency within religious communities as an alternative space often viewed as unsecular and repressive. This book is also a useful addition to feminist and critical research methods. It is a vital resource for those looking to explore silent unwritten rules and norms as new forms of knowledge to understand complex social relations making different ethnic, racial, and gender communities vulnerable in a democratic society.