



Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India

by Natasha Behl, New York City, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 172 pp., \$74.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780190949426

Celeste Montoya

To cite this article: Celeste Montoya (2020): Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India, New Political Science, DOI: [10.1080/07393148.2020.1809795](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2020.1809795)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2020.1809795>



Published online: 30 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India, by Natasha Behl, New York City, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 172 pp., \$74.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780190949426

Gendered Citizenship is an original, important, and timely contribution to the study of democracy and citizenship. In it, Natasha Behl confronts the limitations of mainstream literatures that fail to account for pertinent exclusions and contradictions. She starts with a compelling puzzle, in which India, regularly regarded as a democratic success that includes influential women across all spheres of government, is also the site of widespread and egregious gender violence. A 2012 household survey by UN Women found that 95% of women in the capital city, Delhi, felt unsafe in public spaces. Behl argues that traditional models of citizenship provide little insight into what is more broadly occurring phenomena: women (and women at the intersection of multiple marginalities in particular) continue to experience pervasive discrimination, exclusion, and violence despite being granted formal equal citizenship. She offers an alternative framework, *situated citizenship*, that serves to deepen not only theoretical understandings of citizenship but also provides methodological guidance for how to better study it empirically. Her rich and thoughtful ethnographic study of Sikh women and their experiences with citizenship in India offers critical insights that speak to political theorists and comparativists alike.

Behl starts her book with the introduction of *situated citizenship* as both a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding how and why subordinated groups experience, negotiate, and resist exclusions in multiple domains. Her emphasis on embodied lived experiences is the central driver in both frameworks. Theoretically, the book accentuates gender and intersecting categories of difference as central to understanding why democratic citizenship has failed in its promise of equality. More than a fixed legal status, citizenship is a social relation whereby the contradictions in all spheres of life serve to reinforce an uneven and unequal democratic experience (p. 3–4). Drawing on feminist theory, especially women of color feminisms, she pushes back on universal conceptualizations of citizenship, arguing the need to not only look at gender, but also its intersections with age, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and dis/ability in shaping how citizenship is experienced. Methodologically, the book moves beyond theoretical interrogations and constructions of citizenship to argue the need for deep and reflexive ethnographic research sensitive to the nuances and contradictions of positionality, context, and agency.

Behl's focus on Sikh women allows an insightful examination into how minority religious groups have experienced and negotiated varied degrees of exclusion within India. As noted by Behl (p. 34–35), gender is often the overlooked category in understandings of the relationship between an Indian secular state and (majority and minority) religious communities. Indian women's bodies often become the site of struggle, with their bodies, rights, and mobility bound up in ongoing tensions. To address the absence of women from these debates, Behl conducts a rich and layered ethnographic study. In multiple trips to Punjab, India between 2000 and 2010, Behl pairs extended participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the Sikh community. She lived with informants; participated in major life moments within local communities; and attended political rallies, campaign events, community meetings, and religious activities. Looking across multiple spheres of society (the state, civil society, religious communities, and the home), she focuses on the varied

mechanisms of what she terms *exclusionary inclusions*. Meant to encapsulate everyday contradictions, *exclusionary inclusion* refers to the range of practices – legal, institutional, ideological, material, and embodied – that cause limited membership in different domains (p. 4).

Behl's findings ultimately challenge common and oversimplified assumptions that democratic institutions protect women and religious communities subordinate them. While the Indian state promises women's equality through its constitutional guarantees and legislative interventions on behalf of women, it rarely delivers on the formal rhetoric. Behl argues that the Indian state has failed women on nearly every indicator of women's status. An important component of this are contradictions within the constitution, particularly the way in which mechanisms designed to secure cultural autonomy for communities, serve to normalize gender discrimination. Further complicating these contradictions is the fact that not all groups experience cultural autonomy uniformly, including Sikhs. "Often Sikh women find themselves torn between their commitments to their religious minority communities and their individual rights as liberal secular citizens" (p. 39). The state is simultaneously the oppressor and the inconsistent liberator, something that Behl highlights with the 2013 Anti-Rape Law.¹ The law expanded the definition of rape, increased penalties, and provided for some victim protections. At the same time, it retained exemptions for marital rape and soldiers and failed to extend protections to LGBTQI citizens. Furthermore, this moment saw the reintroduction of regressive discourses and legislative measures, from the reemphasis on women's rights and duties as wives and mother to the restriction and policing of women's freedom of association, travel, and mobility, all in the name of safety. One particularly troubling development was the suggestion by some politicians that Indian women who reject Hindu religiosity deserve to be raped and assaulted.


Whereas democratic institutions in India have often failed to fully deliver on the promise of either religion autonomy or gender equality, Behl argues that "the religious community can, albeit in a limited fashion, provide women with the resources to envision and enact gender equity and religious autonomy as paired goals" (p. 52). Like the state, civil society and the home are both experienced as sites of exclusionary inclusion, rife with contradictions. Participants shared Sikh narratives of egalitarianism at the same time they naturalized discriminatory exclusions. Most participants understand women as partial members of their communities with limited rights and duties (p. 68), and many described women as perpetual outsiders (p. 77). Gender violence, on a continuum from sexual assault and rape to gendered norms and informal rules governing accesses to rights and resources, is used in all domains to remind women that they do not belong as citizens and are always at risk (p. 83). At the same time, women actively negotiate and challenge exclusionary inclusions. Behl's situated analysis of women's participation in Sikhmani Seva Societies, devotional religious organizations, demonstrates some of the interventions made by women to create devotional spaces that value women's leadership, religiosity, and equality (p. 101). These devotional acts, she argues, should be understood as citizenship acts, as they contribute to the development of communities, provide public goods and services, and function as an infrastructure of civil, religious, and political interaction (p. 103).

Behl concludes her rich and deeply nuanced study, with a thoughtful and reflexive auto-ethnography. A rare contribution within political science, this chapter underscores Behl's argument of situation citizenship and scholarship. *Gendered Citizenship* is well written and well worth the read for its deeply insightful theoretical discussion, thoughtful and reflective methodology, and rich and compelling empirical work.

¹The law was passed as part of the response to the highly publicized attack of Jyoti Singh on a bus in Dehli, India on December 16, 2012.

Notes on contributor

Celeste Montoya is an Associate Professor of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. She is author of *From Global to Grassroots: The European Union, Transnational Advocacy, and Combating Violence against Women* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and co-editor of *Gendered Mobilization and Intersectional Challenges: Contemporary Social Movements in Europe and North America* (ECPR Press, 2019).

Celeste Montoya
Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA
 celeste.montoya@colorado.edu

© 2020 Celeste Montoya
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2020.1809795>

