

## Gendered citizenship: understanding gendered violence in democratic India

by Natasha Behl, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, South Asia Edition, 2019, 172 pp., Rs. 1100 (hardbound), ISBN 13: 978-0-19-009876-6

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Gendered citizenship: understanding gendered violence in democratic India**, by Natasha Behl, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, South Asia Edition, 2019, 172 pp., Rs. 1100 (hardbound), ISBN 13: 978-0-19-009876-6

Natasha Behl's book comes at a moment when citizenship in India has acquired a political charge, in the wake of the popular resistance against the newly minted Citizenship Amendment Act 2019. This moment has juxtaposed citizenship as defined by law, and its practice and embodiment by people, as it were. Bodies are being marked as citizens or non-citizens, and it is in this environment of flux that novel expressions of gendered citizenship may be seen in spaces such as Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, Lucknow's Clock Tower or Kolkata's Park Circus Maidan. These spaces have emerged at the threshold of different binaries- public/private, citizen/subject or abstract/embodied. Though Behl's book was published before this act was passed, it could be read in the light of these developments in India's political terrain, where religion is a force to reckon with. The book develops on the idea of 'situated citizenship', which goes beyond the legal dimensions of this category to explore its embodied, everyday and concrete formulations. As Behl writes, 'situated citizenship requires an intersectional and embodied approach to citizenship, which moves us beyond questions of formal equality' (17). Her work seeks to locate the practice of citizenship contextually, mired in a web of often-conflicting or intersecting identities like gender, caste or race, rather than following the 'thin' legally enunciated principle of citizenship, which is premised on individualism. The book highlights the contradiction between formal equality that undergirds citizenship rights and inclusion in a democratic country and the processes of exclusionary inclusion that emerge through a complex process of identity formation and community building. The opening of the book with the most spectacular case of gender and sexual violence in India's recent past poses the paradox of equality for women in the Indian context. While women got equal rights in India after independence, their lives are still marred by discrimination and violence, of which the 2012 rape case was a brutal reminder. In Chapter 3, the book delves into a discussion on Justice Verma Committee (JVC, hereafter), formed in the wake of that incident to suggest a series of legal reforms to bring about gender justice, but in vain. Most of the path-breaking suggestions of JVC were ignored by Parliament while amending the criminal law related to rape in 2013, excluding the domains of marriage, alternative sexualities and national security from its purview. Behl argues that these omissions from law have created gendered citizens, based on societal norms that limit the formal domain of citizenship rights and make democratization in countries like India a fraught process. Her book stands, therefore, as a critique of 'democratization' understood in strictly formal terms and of conventional theorizations of citizenship, where it is positively correlated to a condition of secular democracy. As opposed to the formal realm of law, Behl sees the possibility of citizenship in the domain of religious devotion – something that according to her is designated as a non-political in the field of Political Science.

To substantiate the conceptual framework marked by 'situated citizenship' and 'exclusionary inclusion' that Behl sets out in the first three chapters of the book, she delves into ethnographic data collected from among women of the Sikh community in Punjab in the last two chapters. In Chapter 4, she brings out the normative structures rooted in interpretations of the Gurus' teachings that exclude women from public spaces, essentializing their role as reproducers and homemakers. Ironically, the 'narrative of egalitarianism' within Sikh religion is overturned in practice, which discriminates against women and considers them as bodies, which are impure. This also limits their exercise of citizenship rights in public realms. Behl calls this 'naturalization of exclusionary


inclusion' that is practised through gendered norms around 'women's rights and duties, public policies, women's religiosity and women's purity' (82). The resources to resist this form of naturalized exclusionary inclusion are also found in the religious domain, which makes it contentious and a politically charged field of power. Through Sikh women's narratives of religiosity and participation in spiritual bodies such as Sukhmani Seva Societies (Chapter 5), Behl concludes that this may activate women's citizenship, while also resolving the tensions between state, community and gender in India. This follows from the discussion in Chapter 3, where she deals with the question of personal laws vis-à-vis women's movements in India and the resultant avowal of the religious domain as patriarchal. Building on the work of scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Behl complicates the religious domain as the one marked with possibility of freedom, where rights are exercised as a community. This is further contextualized through Sikh women's resistance to the patriarchal structure of the majoritarian, Hindu personal laws (39). The assertion of minority rights and gendered citizenship overlap in this analysis.

The other major argument of the book is to methodologically intervene in the discipline of Political Science and question its epistemological foundations, rooted in abstract theoretical premises, claims to universality and verifiable data. Through ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods, critically positioning her diasporic Indian-American self, amidst her respondents, Behl seeks to rethink knowledge production and pushes the limits of categories such as politics, citizenship and gender, to understand them contextually, in an intersectional arrangement. The narratives of her respondents shape her understanding of politics, rather than the other way round.

Though the book claims to bring about a new approach to look at 'politics in unusual places', it tends to overemphasize on the literature that has emerged within the broad field of Political Science as practised in several American universities, relying on quantifiable data, generalizable claims and liberal philosophical presumptions. It would have helped to include an analysis of the emerging research on politics in locations within the Global South or in departments doing interdisciplinary research. A large part of the literature dealing with questions of democratic practice, historical and anthropological analysis of citizenship and state is conspicuous by its absence. Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Akhil Gupta, Thomas Blom Hansen, Anupama Roy among others could have served as interesting interlocutors in the debates Behl seeks to engage with concerning the domain of everyday politics, gendered citizenship, civil society, state and religion. Anupama Roy, in her book *Gendered Citizenship* (2005) unravels the historical processes through which women staked claims to nation-building processes and citizenship in India through archival research. Concentrating on the difference between law and practice, Roy's work also seeks to critically frame the concept of citizenship. Another political scientist, Niraja Gopal Jayal has also discussed genealogies of citizenship in her work *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History* (2013), while bringing out the performative aspects of this identity. Given this, one wonders why this book does not engage with these seminal texts in the field of Indian Political Science, which talk of similar propositions about citizenship beyond the formal domain?

In seeking to reinvent citizenship as a field of practice beyond the formal, legal framework, Behl buttresses her argument through an account of feminist scholarship on the limits of law and state in bringing about women's equality. Even though the way to equality in this work is unusual, the book nevertheless sustains the importance of 'equality' as an important framework, rather than thinking beyond it. In Behl's account, the devotional practices of Sikh women pull them out of the conundrums of gender discrimination and passivity in day-to-day life, but are not interpreted beyond the framework of 'egalitarianism'. Could these practices also tell one something about the gendered idioms of politics or the nature of communities that are created in relation to patriarchal structures? A more concerted engagement with Tanika Sarkar's work on the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti or Tarini Bedi's work on Shiv Sena's women cadres in instituting a politics of 'matronage' could have taken the question of women's participation in newer directions, rather than confining it within the terminology and framework of liberal democratization, that Behl herself is wary of.

The book is definitely an important addition in the field of gender and citizenship and offers a possibility of interesting theorizations of time tested political concepts, especially in the present context, where constitutional and legal enunciations of citizenship are open for renegotiation and realignments.

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