

Book Review

Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India. By Natasha Behl. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019, 184 pp., \$74.00 (cloth).

DOI: 10.1177/0891243220902769

In this book that exemplifies immense clarity in thought and prose, political scientist Natasha Behl asks “why is it that women’s lives are potentially at fatal risk in everyday sites of public participation and in the private space of the home, when Indian democratic institutions are nominally inclusive in terms of gender equity?” (p. 3) This seemingly straightforward puzzle at the heart of this book opens up timely discussions around democracy, citizenship, religion, and gender in India. In the context of pervasive sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in India, this book comes as a welcome addition that explains why the promise of democratic equality remains unrealized, especially for the women in the country. That there exists a gap between the promises and practices of democracy is perhaps not surprising to anyone—but what this book explores is how this gap shapes the uneven experience of citizenship in contemporary India, and how this situated experience shapes gendered subjectivity. In Behl’s own words, thinking about citizenship as being “situated” requires an “intersectional and embodied approach to citizenship, which moves us beyond questions of formal equality, and asks how mediating forces, such as norms and informal rules, impact citizens’ capacity to enact their rights and take democratic action” (p. 16). In provoking literature in political science to think about lived experience of women and men in religious communities, Behl makes a compelling case for political ethnography—one that extends the scope of “the political” beyond formal governmental institutions, political elites, and electoral politics.

This book relies primarily on ethnographic observations among, and interviews of, members of the Sikh community in Punjab, India—a community that has remained relatively understudied in contemporary social scientific writing on religion and gender in South Asia. However, Behl’s unique approach in this book also relies on an astute analysis of media

narratives and critical legal discourse of other notable cases of SGBV across the country. In chapter three, for instance, Behl scrutinizes the media discourse around the gangrape and murder of a Jyoti Singh in New Delhi in 2012—a case that attracted international attention and became the cornerstone of feminist mobilization in the country. Behl persuasively shows how while progressive social movements in response to this horrific gangrape pointed to some promising political possibilities, the retrenchment of patriarchal norms, especially in terms of legal measures, points to how limited and limiting legal reform can be when it comes to eradicating gendered violence. In weaving in and out of her primary data, Behl captures the contradictions and unevenness of laws governing gendered violence in India and situates it in larger debates about the tensions and frictions between state, law, religious community, and gender.

Chapters four and five have a more overt focus on the men and women of the Sikh community Behl spent time with over multiple visits between 2000 and 2010. With great empathy and understanding, the author demonstrates how women members of this community experience neither civil society nor the space of the home as a place of safety, security, and respect. For instance, Behl shows how women are made sense of in relation to their place at home or their capacity to be married, and norms around purity and pollution govern how, when, and why women are included or excluded from certain facets of associational life. The data from this book clearly show how most members of the community interpret gender equality and religious autonomy as being incompatible with one another. While the Sikh community is known to be radically egalitarian in terms of inclusion of gender, data reveal how this inclusion in practice is always conditional and essentializes women as inferior.

At the same time, this book contends, some women find devotional organizations—such as Sukhmani Seva Societies—to be spaces of active citizenship and a vibrant associational life wherein they envision and enact more egalitarian interpersonal and community relations through their devotional practices. Behl suggests that it might be fruitful to interpret acts of devotion as acts of citizenship in order to challenge longstanding liberal assumptions regarding the undemocratic nature of religious relations. Instead, the book argues, we need to pay closer attention to gendered practices in these devotional communities that challenge exclusionary inclusion and provide a creative mode of thinking about the links between state, religion, and gender.

Taking seriously the call to examine embodied forms of knowledge production and an exploration of power relations in everyday life, this

book comes as a welcome addition to intersectional feminist literature in the social sciences. Especially for young researchers of South Asia, this book is a useful template that paves the way for further critical scholarship that is unafraid of the messy realities of law, democracy, gender, and religion in everyday life in the subcontinent.

SNEHA ANNAVARAPU
University of Chicago