
Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India: The Role of Activism. Nandini Deo. New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 160.

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In *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India*, Nandini Deo traces the 20th century histories of the Hindu nationalist movement and the Indian women's movement by specifically examining their changing strategies and ideologies. This examination is undertaken in order to comprehend why the Indian women's movement was largely successful in the first half of the century but today is a relatively marginal political player in contrast with the growing Hindu nationalist movement. Through a historical analysis of the two movements' membership levels, electoral results, policies, and public opinion of the movements, as well as interviews with movement members, Deo attempts to pinpoint specific moments in which membership levels and public responses underwent dramatic shifts.

The book centres on the argument that both movements' particular activist strategies were responses to external events, rather than having been shaped by particular political ideologies. Of the numerous examples she offers, two, in particular, clearly stand in support of this argument. First, she highlights the marginalization of the Hindu nationalist movement after Partition, as a result of the general discomfort with traumas caused by communal tension. After the momentary ban of the RSS (1948), the Hindu right was forced to develop new strategies, and chose to invest in education through the opening of its own schools. Since this time, new branches of the movement have extended this outreach to include service provision, targeting slum dwellers by providing health care, literacy programs and prayer meetings; the author's own examination of these services shows that this service provision is often a fundamental channel to disseminate ideology.

In contrast, the women's movement has had a different approach to education. While the foundational years of the Indian women's movement saw activists mobilized around education reform as a key site for potential empowerment, after Independence the movement largely relied on the state to carry out the expansion of education for women (as, post-Partition, many channels of the movement were either busy working in refugee camps with traumatized women, or participating in nation-building at the state level). Deo argues that by leaving education solely in the hands of the state, the women's movement no longer had access to a significant site where feminist principles could be instilled in both children and parents, while the Hindu right's schools were able to spread ideology and directly access new membership. This strategical difference is significant, for, as Deo highlights, it was not until the 1990s that the government made a serious commitment to compulsory education. And so, while not all citizens may adhere to Hindutva ideology, they may take advantage of offered educational services, regardless of who the provider is.

Deo's second example of a significant shift in strategy occurred during the post-Emergency period, in which there was a general distrust of the state by both the Hindu nationalist movement and the women's movement. While this was not new for the former, this was the first time that the latter emerged in opposition to the state, resulting in the birth of an autonomous women's movement. Despite the positive growth that Deo highlights during this period, including the pioneering 'Towards Equality report', the birth of women's studies programs, and some success with legal reforms, the movement could no longer rely on state funding and had to look elsewhere to raise resources, which often meant turning to foreign funding. The author highlights four effects of the women's movement's reliance on foreign funding: 1) Women's groups were then in competition with each other, making cooperation a challenge; 2) The issue of foreign funding became politicized through a rhetoric that women's activists were "too Western"; 3) Foreign funding influenced the priorities of activists (seen through the international focus on violence against women); 4) India was opened up to a proliferation of international NGOS which, at times, were disconnected from local needs of women. Deo highlights that while the women's movement was focused on developing transnational links, the Hindu nationalist movement was making its own connections overseas through the Hindu diaspora, while at the same time maintaining a steady growth in the expansion of domestic projects and service provision. For Deo, this is a key difference in strategy that has been fruitful for the Hindu nationalist movement.

Past scholarship has detailed specific events that have caused Hindu nationalists and feminists to enter into conversation with each other (for example, the events surrounding Shah Bano¹ and Roop Kanwar²). Deo's contribution, however, is to map the developments and trajectories of these two movements throughout the 20th century, articulating how both movements continuously challenged – albeit in different ways – the public and private divisions of society enacted through Indian secularism. By highlighting this similarity, the author is able to compare and contrast more precisely these two as parallel movements. While this method of charting will be a useful resource for researchers, it is necessary to problematize the perception of these two movements as entirely defined and bounded in their identity and self-conception; we must question whether the borders around these movements are as rigid as Deo presents. For instance, could one woman make use of Hindu nationalist services, but also participate in a protest against gender-based violence? Subsequently, how does the author's demarcation enforce homogenized

1. Cf. F. Agnes, "Redefining the Agenda of the Women's Movement within a Secular Framework," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 17 (suppl. 001) (1994): 63-78.

2. Cf. M. Kishwar and R. Vanita, "The Burning of Roop Kanwar," *Manushi* 42/43 (1987): 15-25.

understandings of both these movements? What is potentially missed in this analysis through the imposition of such strict barriers around these movements, especially if membership is a key site of analysis?

Aside from this, Deo's project successfully answers the questions set out in the introduction. While her work clearly contributes to social movement theory, it should also be seen as significant for the field of religious studies, as much of the scholarship on religion and politics, and Hindu nationalism specifically, begins with an examination of political theology and movement ideology. Alternatively, Deo's work demonstrates how quantitative studies of base activities (including non-religiously oriented activities) may be a useful starting point to understand the attraction and success of religio-political organizations (Deo "...looks at what Hindu nationalists *do*, not just what they *say*" [150]).

While Deo's conclusion addresses some of the new conversations that have arisen for these two movements in the beginning of the 21st century, it would be interesting to see this study expanded to recent years, specifically as the BJP (Hindu right-wing political party) has once again been elected to power in 2014. The threat of Hindutva looms in new ways over many channels of Indian social activism, even as a distinctive wave of feminist mobilizing is challenging extremism and patriarchy in India and around the world. This is certainly an interesting moment in Indian political organizing and studies like Deo's could be useful for both academic reflection and activist strategizing on the ground.