

# Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India: The Role of Activism

Sadia Saeed

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India: The Role of Activism**, by Nandini Deo, London, Routledge, 2016, xiv + 159 pp., \$51.95 (Paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-49342-1

The rise of Hindu nationalism under the premiership of Narendra Modi continues to be a disturbing trend in Indian politics. Nandini Deo's book is a fresh and illuminating contribution to an ample literature explaining this trend. A political scientist by training, Deo brings a much-needed comparative perspective to the problem of Hindu nationalism. Specifically, she compares the trajectory of women's movement in India with that of Hindu nationalism. While the former went from being an effective movement in mid-twentieth century to an ineffective movement by the end of the century, the fortunes of Hindu nationalism moved in the opposite direction. From a position of strength, Hindu nationalist movement moved to its nadir in the 1950s, recovering and building its strength in the 1990s. Deo's aim in the present book is to trace and explain this variation (p. 5).

The 'success' of movements is defined through measures such as membership numbers; electoral results (when applicable); successful agenda setting; and policy outcomes, among others. The primary scholarship that Deo engages with is social movements literature pioneered by sociologists such as Bill Gamson, Charles Tilly, Sydney Tarrow, Doug McAdam and Benford Snow. This scholarship has provided the key terms and concepts for studying social movement outcomes across social science disciplines, many of which are deployed in the preset book: resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, framing strategies, and do forth. Deo argues that the primary variable that explains movement outcomes for her two empirical cases is the level of mobilization of grassroots supporters that occurs during normal times. Deo finds that 'investing in grassroots supporters' is a much more effective strategy than that of 'cultivating alliances or coalitions with groups or individuals outside the immediate constituency of the social movement' (p. 3).

By taking a comparative approach and highlighting this decisive aspect of Indian social movements, Deo seeks to make a contribution to Indian Studies scholarship that, she argues, is ensnared in normative debates and hence does not take a social scientific, disinterested and analytical approach to social movements. Deo also considers a longer historical time period than is typical in this scholarship. Instead of beginning her account in the late 1970s and 1980s, she identifies critical junctures that span a much longer time period. Deo's findings are based on an impressive array of primary and secondary source materials including books, annual reports and pamphlets created by NGOs; newspaper reports; and existing historical and sociological accounts of Indian social movements. Deo also draws on personal interviews (an impressive thirty-eight women's activists, two dozen Hindu nationalists, twenty Indian bureaucrats, nine aid agency officials, and handful of journalists).

Following the introductory chapter, the book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter two provides a sophisticated theoretical discussion of the relationship between gender, religion and the secular. Deo argues that both India's women's movements and religious movements share a common impulse to define and regulate the public/private boundary authorized by secular modernity. Furthermore, Deo acknowledges that her two cases are not independent in the sense that both movements often challenge each other on how this boundary ought to be defined. Matters are further complicated by the presence of women supporters in Hindu nationalist movements. Deo draws out these various threads, linkages and contradictions in this chapter, setting the stage for her historical narrative.

Chapter three looks at two key individuals who were pivotal in emerging social movements in colonial India, one a women's reform movement and the other a Hindu reform movement. This chapter details the biography of V.D. Savarkar, the first ideologue of Hindu Nationalism (*Hinduvta*) who became the president of the nation-wide Hindu Mahasabha. The second individual discussed is Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, the niece of acclaimed Rabindranath Tagore, member of Indian National Congress and a women's activist. Deo also highlights recurring features in the organization of these movements.


Chapter four carries this discussion into the post-independence period. These first crucial decade of independent India saw the women's movement gain in popularity as it was rewarded for its support for the national movement for independence. The women's movement mainstreamed itself by working in refugee camps and helping integrate refugees into the new nation; by contributing to constitutional debates; and engaging in grassroots activities. The Hindu nationalist movement, however, fell into disrepute after one of its members assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. Deo highlights how this turned out to be a critical period for Hindu nationalists as they worked quietly to develop 'two very important strategies for the Hindu right – investing in education and establishing a division of labour between political, cultural, and service organizations' (p. 55–6). The former entailed building a network of well-functioning schools that imparted ideas about Hindu nationalism while the latter entailed rationalizing the organizational form of key groups such as the RSS.

Chapter five discusses India's 'quiet' decade of the 1960s. Set against the background of a Congress fast losing touch with its grassroots supporters under the premiership of Indira Gandhi and India's Green Revolution, this chapter details how Hindu nationalism formally entered politics through electoral campaign of Jan Singh party, thus beginning its journey of mainstreaming and normalizing itself that we witness today. The women's movement continued to remain aligned with the state and maintained an active presence in bureaucracies and voluntary agencies set up by the state. But all this changed in the 1970s, especially in the years leading up to the Emergency, the topic of Chapter Six. Now, the women's movement turned increasingly contentious and India entered into one of its most populist decades as poor women, indigenous people and Communists organized to protest objectionable state policies causing undue economic distress to people. The result was a pushback by the state in the form of Emergency rule. It was at this moment that the Hindu nationalists made their big push and undertook successful grassroots mobilization in opposition to the state, which paid off when Jan Singh gained a major electoral victory. Both the women's and Hindu nationalist movements enjoyed national spotlight in these years.

The remaining chapters detail the rise of identity politics in India in the 1980s. Deo now enters a much-covered scholarly terrain. Deo explains how new political opportunity structures enacted by the end of Emergency and return to democracy led to organizational and ideological innovations and successes. Hindu nationalists made use of the shifting landscape to frame their movement and its goals in novel ways. Essentially they adopted a more hardline politics. It is in this context that the BJP emerged as a political party in 1984 that would slowly but steadily march towards national success. At the same time, the women's movement would become defensive and reach towards a transnational audience in an unsuccessful bid to boost itself. Deo describes how the Indian women's movement retreated from politics into the academy and transnational NGOs. At the same time, Hindu nationalists organized to make a successful bid for politics by combining a transnational outreach programme with internal grassroots mobilization.

*Mobilizing Religion and Gender* provides a smart, articulate and an overall superb analysis that deserves to be engaged with widely. Although Deo situates the book analytically in social movements theory, the analysis touches on a host of other relevant scholarly debates (e.g.

women's agency and secularization theory). The comparison between the two cases of religious nationalist movement and women's movement works surprisingly well in illuminating key dynamics of both. This can be attributed to Deo's skilful weaving of a narrative that proceeds chronologically while intertwining the trajectories of the two movements through their embeddedness in a shared historical context. Students of social movements, critical scholars of gender, postcolonial theorists, and sociologists and political scientists interested in India will find much of interest in this book.

Sadia Saeed  
*University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA*  
 [ssaeed3@usfca.edu](mailto:ssaeed3@usfca.edu)

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