



Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India: The Role of Activism

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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., ISBN 978-1-138-49342-1, Sahoo

Nandini Deo's *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India* examines the complex and contingent relationship between religion, gender and social movements in India and discusses the role of activism in democratic governance. Deo asks: what factors account for success and failure of social movements? 'Why do some campaigns work and others fade away? What is the relationship between movement impact and organizational structures? And, what is the relative balance between shifting structural conditions and activist initiative in creating new social realities?' (11). Addressing these, Deo makes a historical comparative analysis of two dominant social and political movements – Hindu nationalism and feminist movement – of twentieth-century India and discusses the variations in the outcomes between the two. Deo argues that although success or failure of social movements is shaped by multiple factors, what matters the most are: ideologies and strategies of the organization, activist responses to structural change, and influence of and interaction with global forces (3). In particular, Deo establishes the link between strategy and success and advocates for understanding the role that contingency plays in shaping the success and/or failure of social and political movements.

The book is divided into nine chapters. It begins with a theoretical discussion on the relationship between gender, religion and the secular where Deo questions the liberal state's emphasis on public-private division and shows how Hindu nationalism and the women's movement have adopted strategies that constantly challenge the public-private boundaries and divisions adopted by the modern Indian state. Both movements originated in the context of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance where ideologies of their founding members influenced their organizational strategies and actions. For example, in the early post-colonial period, while the exclusivist and violent ideologies and approaches of Hindu nationalism led to its ban from mainstream politics, the inclusive and egalitarian ideologies and strategies of the women's movement led to its success. Considering this, Hindu nationalists changed their strategies by diversifying their organizational structure and strengthening grassroots mobilization.

In the post-Emergency period, while Hindu nationalists became actively involved in grassroots mobilization and electoral politics, the women's movement became increasingly disengaged from electoral politics, parties and the state. Instead of returning to grassroots politics or establishing a coalition with political parties, they chased financial support from international donors, which eventually weakened their ability to mobilize the masses. In the 1990s, the Hindu nationalists emerged stronger and more successful owing to their grassroots support base and organizational diversification. As Deo notes, the 'heterogeneity of the Sangh's many organizations [gave] it ideological flexibility to innovate' (118). Building on this, Hindu nationalists reached out to global/transnational forces, especially the Indian diaspora, which provided legitimacy and financial backing to strengthen the movement. In contrast, the feminist movement, due to its lack of grassroots support base, became weakened and took refuge in safer spaces. Based on this, Deo argues that the women's movement 'found itself [increasingly] constrained' by foreign forces and came to be considered the 'inauthentic' voice within Indian politics (137). Though Hindu nationalists were similarly constrained by the Indian diaspora, they managed to shift discourse to the right because of their strong grassroots support base. As a consequence, '[b]y the end of the century, Hindu nationalism was seen as a major force within Indian politics while the women's movement was regarded ... as a vibrant but minority constituency' (137). Given this, Deo concludes that 'everyday acts of community organizing' (8) plays an important role in determining why a campaign succeeds or fails.

This book is very unique and makes important contributions. First, for the first time, it brings together Hindu nationalism in comparison with the feminist movement of India. Second, it examines the complex and contingent relationship between ideologies, strategies, structural forces and trans-national links in explaining the rise and fall of social movements. Third, it provides a very well structured and sophisticated theory of social change. And finally, it shows how 'comparative chronological history' as a method is vital to understanding Indian politics. In summation, the book is analytically sophisticated and rich with insights and makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the complex interrelationship between religion, gender, social movements and the state in India.

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