

## Beyond the Private World: Indian Women in the Public Sphere

Ed. by Subrata Bagchi

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This volume makes a meaningful attempt to expand the discussion on gender and public sphere beyond their conventional, discursive landscapes within Indian academia, that is, as largely confined to modernity. The thirteen essays in the volume — apart from the introduction and the conclusion — are thematically organised under four different sections: Religion and Women in Pre-Modern India, Women in Modern India, Indian Women and the Means of Empowerment and Change, and Indian Women Break with the Tradition. The book belongs to the genre of theorising women's presence in the public sphere in India with a major inflection proposed and introduced at the conceptual level. The book is also an attempt to bridge the gap, especially in gender studies and other related fields, in addressing "the growing presence of women and hurdles in public sphere in India" (ix).

It opens with a rigorous but slightly laboured editorial engagement with the major themes of the volume, namely, the public sphere, women and conceptual overview. The chapters that follow, cover a range of issues spread across ancient and pre-modern times — such as 'Conceptualising Women, Public Sphere and Hinduism in Ancient India' by Anita Bagchi and 'Situation Ethics and Muslim Women in Medieval India' by Farhat Nasreen — to contemporary issues — such as 'Impediments to Economic Freedom: Women's Livelihood and Work Participation Trends in India' by Sanchari Roy Mukherjee and 'Confronting Patriarchy: Women, Sport and the Public Sphere in Postcolonial India' by Suparna Ghosh Bhattacharya and Kaushik Bandyopadhyay.

The vastitude of the volume and the theoretical terrain that it attempts to trudge is one major feature that will attract the reader. And while it might initially seem discouraging that most, if not all, of the contributors of

the volume belong to the favourite land of academics in India – Bengal; nonetheless, the content of the book moves beyond the peripheries of any single region, constituting conceptions of a broader public sphere and discourses therein.

The larger project of the volume spills outside usual temporal and spatial limits. All the contributors, in one way or another, declare the conceptual inadequacy of the Habermasian public sphere in order to conceptualise the public sphere in India. Instead, essays draw upon and address multiple public spheres where gender discourses, as regular events, address specific sets of issues and concerns. Women's presence in the public sphere could be renegotiated by expanding the limits of the public sphere to include several other elements that are instrumental in mediating those concerns, and not just coffee houses and postcolonial spaces of print. Everything outside the private domain — a vicinity that is very closely attached with women's existence in both traditional and modern Indian societies — become spaces to be reinvented and/or revisited.

This outside-ness does not immediately cater to a standard imagination of public sphere. Nevertheless, such presences, both individually and collectively, are indeed meaningful and a part and parcel of given public spheres. This is one fascinating theme that emerges from the book and is succinctly put forth in the introduction itself. Rather than restricting the analysis to public contestations within different regionalities, the ground of the whole analysis is shifted further to the serious problematic of access to public spheres on the lines of caste, gender and religion (116). However fascinating, such endeavours have yet to travel some distance before attaining clarity. For example, a conceptual vagueness regarding multiple public spheres and multiple layers

of a singular, mainstream public sphere, still looms over several essays of the volume.

The discussions on Muslim (147-168) and Dalit women (168-183) in India in the section on Women in Modern India are two instances where the question of public sphere is invoked in the context of movement towards citizenship rights. However, an engagement with questions at a conceptual level could have benefitted these essays instead of making them look like abrupt presences inside the volume. This is so, even while they, as most other chapters, are definitely good reads in their individual capacities.

While commenting upon some of the major intellectual discourses on development, Adebayo Olukoshi has argued how the production of theories and narratives happen in the North [West], with the South [East] being confined to textboxes. The intellectuals from the East are stamped into addressing their region. The critique from the East or from the rest of the West reaches nowhere. The current volume undertakes a theorisation of public sphere as a serious enterprise by transplanting the same outside bourgeoisie locations. The idea is to not to miss the opportunity to analyse and understand the evolution and circulation of “ideas, public opinion and sentiments” (5) in the multiple publics that have historically and politically remained scattered but as parallel to each other.

Edited volumes are not often read from the beginning to the end, least of all in one sitting. Readers are more likely to pick and choose from a heterogeneous collection depending upon their respective interests. The absence of some threads running commonly throughout the disparate collection is a case of lost opportunity. The section on empowerment as a means of change for Indian women remains indistinct with very minimum effort undertaken towards understanding the cultural impediments operating therein. The diverse collection of essays could have provided the possibility of fusing the socio-economic domain with the domain of cultural politics – a gap that still exists in the contemporary Indian academia.

Manisha Banerjee and Marina Basu show how “home-bound identity” and the “mother cult” (221-222) – of imagining girls as future mothers – significantly hamper women’s educational programmes and their entrance into politics. Depicting the multiple claims towards an otherwise singular, and perhaps elitist, public sphere simultaneously reflects on a different dynamics of group formations and collective identities. Chakraborty and Bagchi write about how such “non-bourgeoisie subaltern

groups” thrusting themselves into a multilayered public sphere (117) disproves the applicability of the standard conceptions of public sphere in India. The complexities involved in undertaking such an exercise comes out most eloquently in the section on the pre-modern registry.

Anita Bagchi, Radhika Seshan and Farhat Nasreen in their respective chapters in the section remind that opening the question of public sphere in pre-modern settings has to deal with the enormous subtleties. Beyond the question of re-imagining the past, it involves making certain imaginations possible even when the past is available. The distribution of characters and the porous structures across time and space, and religions and sects including Buddhas, Jainas, the Vedics, the Bhakti movement and Islam scattered over a vast span of time across the ancient and the medieval periods brings more clarity to the imagination in two respects: first, that patriarchy as a rigid structure had indeed unfolded in a matter of over 2500 years (63), and second, even in its rigid forms, patriarchy had not remained fully successful in keeping women from entering spheres outside the private domain.

Of this, the first one especially extricates, although not entirely unproblematically, researches from imagining pre-modernity as an enclosed period, for discussions of the evolution of ideas. This in fact complicates our understanding of the past, opening up new possibilities for conceptualising gender and even its intersections with caste. In other words, if discussions on the public sphere in India have so far remained sealed off, with rare exceptions, from entering into pre-modern times, the current volume posits the dire need to ask such questions without which one is unlikely to find answers.

The volume is definitely an instance of invoking the “heterogeneous time” proposed by Partha Chatterjee once, against the homogeneous empty time of Benedict Anderson and Walter Benjamin. Gender has remained a favourite playground for Indian scholars to examine postcolonial transitions, and especially to understand nationalism and regional public spheres. The current volume certainly expands these imaginations by pushing the scope of study further back in time and outside usual modernity to shed more light on our understanding. However, given its unwieldy scope, some more conceptual consistency in editorial organization could have benefitted this otherwise scattered and unconnected collection of essays. The volume, as it is, remains eminently readable for the questions it triggers both conceptually and methodologically for reimagining the public sphere in India.