

Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *Refashioning India: Gender, Media, and a Transformed Public Discourse*. Hyderabad, India: Orient BlackSwan, 2017, 325 pages (hardcover). ISBN: 978-93-86689-00-9.

DOI: 10.1177/0971521520980857

Refashioning India is an aptly captivating title for the book under review that revolves around changing images and the recasting and representation of India through public discourse where the state, market and media play a crucial role. Gender becomes a common trope by which such discourses are created, managed and disseminated. One recurring theme that runs through this work is the rhetoric of creating a gender-equal/gender-just society and the sustenance of patriarchy through the politics of capitalism and neo-liberalism. The compilation of 11 essays in the book is an outcome of the author's continuous engagement, close and meticulous observation of the Indian political economy and expansion of media.

The book can be read into two inter-connected parts—gender discourses in the pre-liberalization and post-liberalization eras. The first two essays complement each other in a sense that one deals with the textual analysis of gender equality in government documents and the second essay looks at the status of women during the early years of Indian nationalism. Tracing the origin of state engagement with the question of gender, the first essay ‘Citizens, Workers, Emblems of Culture: An Analysis

of the First Plan Document on Women' critically analyses the first plan document on Indian women prepared by the sub-committee on Women's Role in Planned Economy. This document recognized the entry of women into production as a means to end the inequality meted out to them. However, female participation in the workforce did not ensure their freedom from household chores, thereby reinforcing the public/private dichotomy. Women who worked out of their homes were viewed as potentially disruptive of the domestic as well as the 'social' order. This reflected a half-hearted effort by the makers of the document towards a discourse of gender equality without questioning the patriarchal norms related to family and marriage that confine women to the domestic sphere. The second essay 'Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State' highlights the dilemmas of Indian women at crossroads: Chaudhuri cites the example of several government schemes—community development, rural development, applied nutrition programme, home science extension programme—that enthusiastically celebrated the tokenism of women's empowerment and gender equality. Their failure lay in attempts to incorporate women as agents of development, reiterating the conventional role of women as dutiful wives and mothers. The author argues that women as a collective rather than an individual unit became the project of the apparently 'neutral' liberal state discourse.

The next three essays (Chapters 4–6) capture the 'shift' in public discourse regarding gender in a mediated post-liberalization era. There is more emphasis on terms like 'freedom' and 'choice' in the language of advertisements, both print and visual, where the Indian woman became an integral part of the consumption process. She is no longer the one who only sacrifices but rather indulges in conspicuous consumption to fulfil her needs and wants. The new image is that of a 'modern' woman who is a part of a global process yet one who retains a few cultural traditions. The author argues that in such (mis)representation of women, the media images displace a large section of the population that could not be a part of this consumption process.

The key argument in these essays is how certain terms like freedom and choice are lifted from the women's movement and appropriated in a different context to express the emergence of a liberalized 'self' that suits the project of a 'market-friendly feminism' (p. 118). It also needs to be stressed that the rise of Hindu right-wing politics during this period ensured a bifurcation between traditional and western feminism—the former associated with the social reform movement and the latter to the individual agency of women in matters of consumption.

The major argument in the early essays of the second part of the book is to understand the socio-economic changes that have impinged on the media, ideas of nationalism and feminism, and most importantly a 'transformed' public. The predominance of media and market and their gradual seeping into the public consciousness, the author argues, is facilitated by market research that draws heavily from textual knowledge. She cites the example of how images of women in the Indian family emphasizes their role in the Hindu joint family despite several changes that have taken place in family structure. The rise of subaltern politics, particularly Dalit assertions, questions the legitimacy of the nation-state. On the other hand, the rise of corporate globalization has given rise to 'corporate feminism' (p. 185) where feminism is no longer a collective effort for emancipation rather is implied through individualized lifestyle choices. The 'hypervisibility' of women in media as 'free' and 'liberated' became the hallmark to justify India's economic reform, neo-liberal patriarchal values immersed in the discourses of consumption.

There was also a shift in the category of 'public' where non-resident Indians (NRIs) have become the part of an extended public sphere. The growth of media as a legitimate agent of the public, the author adds, in the second last chapter, 'National and Global Media Discourse after "Nirbhaya": Instant Access and Unequal Knowledge' was evident during the reportage of the 'Nirbhaya' rape case in December 2012. Media channelized the public outrage to question the government. There were multiple sites where discourses on gender violence and women's safety were discussed—even to the extent of rape being considered to be 'a product of westernisation' (p. 245). The global discourse, on the other hand, guided by international human and gender rights organizations considered the vulnerability of women in India as one of the drawbacks in the brand image of global India. The concluding chapter 'The 2014 General Elections and Afterwards: A Churning Public Discourse and the New Hegemony' shows how this case was pivotal in preparing the ground for the 2014 general elections in India where gender issues were in focus during election campaigns. There is a return to the previous situation where the idea of 'gender equality' is much talked about than acted upon to achieve it. It, therefore, becomes problematic and demands scrutiny as it does not necessarily add up to a greater gender-just society. *Refashioning India: Gender, Media, and a Transformed Public Discourse* provides a nuanced understanding of the politics involved in the hyper visibility of gender discourses. Chaudhuri's

discussions and analyses are extremely valuable in an environment where it is increasingly necessary to ensure that gender retains its centrality within public discourse.

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