

# Lens refocused

There was a time when sociologists writing about the new Indian middle classes would hark back to the colonial era to unearth a past where colonial administration and regional social reform movements were seen to constitute the canvas at hand, whatever the nature of transformation. By and large, this was the most chosen temporal frame when writing about transformations of the middle class. Against this context, it becomes worthy of note that Maitrayee Chaudhuri, in *Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse*, takes the liberalization of the Indian economy, the 1990s, as her principal point of departure. This deliberate readjustment of the sociologist's chosen historical/temporal lens is indicative of how, in contemporary public memory, the past has come to be earmarked as an era which, in terms of lifestyles, images, debates and so on, seems to be eons away, primarily owing to the changed nature of the media.

Chaudhuri methodically builds up a triptych of gender, media and a public discourse about 'India' in this book to convey and analyse the manner in which the nation is re-crafted through public discourse. The essays written over a span of 20 years have been chronologically arranged, beginning with a reading on the report by a subcommittee on Women's Role in Planned Economy of the National Planning Commission in 1947. One of Chaudhuri's central contentions cutting across the book is that the public discourse in India has changed and the media are crucial to this recasting. In this sense, Chaudhuri does not enter a *terra incognita* but deals with a familiar domain. She is wary of a commonsensical knowledge that claims to be sociological and her marshalling of evidence sets this work apart from everyday discussions. The anthology is laced with her foresight. As early as 2000, Chaudhuri writes about how the BJP substantively reworks principles like secularism as its discursive strategy.

The first six essays chart how gender entered the public discourse about the nation through a reading of media debates on the Shah Bano case, or Roop Kanwar's immolation in the 1980s,

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## REFASHIONING INDIA: GENDER, MEDIA AND A TRANSFORMED PUBLIC DISCOURSE

By Maitrayee Chaudhuri,  
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when women were seen as cultural emblems and recipients of development. It then turns to shifts in this discourse a decade after liberalization when feminism, espoused by the print media, retreats from its earlier commitment to caste, class, social justice, and the meaning of women's movements and their goals are reworked to fit the tenor of consumerism and choice in the public discourse of the period. The focus shifts to electronic media in the essays written from 2010 onwards. If the media can be seen as a conduit through which the nation remakes itself, it is also seen as an entity whose contours are tenuous, shifting with relation to the State and the market. Chaudhuri shows how the rhapsody between the State and the media in India changes to disenchantment with the prime minister retreating from print and electronic media, preferring to air views through social media.

Chaudhuri uses the very language of public discourse as the fabric of these essays to write analytically *about* public discourse and how it was formed in the crucible of liberalization and its aftermath. Arguments are built to the point of breaking into a falsetto to talk about the rupture in public discourse and in *life itself*. Chaudhuri betrays an affinity for the austerity of the Nehruvian era reflected in her repeated reference to a celebration of profligacy by contemporary media, hyperboles about the nation and nationalism, and an increasingly "loquacious public culture" — which expurgates the class 'others' from the public discourse. The book is sobering as well as edifying as it makes one reflect on the question that a time will come when the values of socialism, austerity or even of pluralism (not in choices but what Chaudhuri calls the 'fabled diversity' of caste, class, ethnicity, language) will not even be a vestige of an Indian past for the generations to come.

Hia Sen