

Media, Gender and the Neo-liberal Indian State

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Maitrayee Chaudhuri's book, *Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse* is in several ways both a critique and chronicle of contemporary India after 1991 seen through its changing media landscape. Through her nuanced reading and analysis of the media paradigm, which undergoes a significant transition after India embraces liberalism, Chaudhuri lays out the pitfalls of the new economic model and its resultant impact on the Indian media ecosystem that is increasingly corporatised and serves the interests of the market or a handful who control the means of production. This has led to an erosion of credibility of the Indian media, and what better way to understand this than examine the Indian media scenario in current times which serves the interests of the ruling elite.

Chaudhuri's book, as indicated in the title, also argues that a country cannot develop without the progress of women. She discusses at length the various confusions of the liberal Indian state and its position on women. While liberalism celebrates the individual's rights, it is invariably the male property-owning individual who is at the focus of attention. The Indian liberal state has an uneasy equation with women individuals. Chaudhuri further probes the confusions typically characteristic of the Indian liberal state, which is wedded to equality on the one hand and patriarchal private property on the other. Women here are perceived as merely cultural symbols. With the advent of liberalism, women also disappeared

Refashioning India: Gender, Media, and a Transformed Public Discourse by Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017; pp 325, ₹950.

from the discourse on development and entered the world of welfare. Chaudhuri further argues that the failure of the Indian state to bring about real and sustained changes for women led to the resurgence of the women's movement in the 1970s.

Culture of Advertisements

Economic liberalisation also marks a departure from India's stated sympathy for socialist ideals. The rhetoric of India's project of globalisation as emancipatory is presented through advertisements, several of which have been closely scrutinised in the book. These new advertisements completely overlook the poor and the marginalised while portraying a shining India whose benefits are enjoyed by a select few. The advertisement lingo soon transitioned from readers to customers. These advertisements also created the myth of accessibility and availability of products which very few could actually afford. Various mass marketing campaigns were effectively engineered to create the illusion of equal participation in a democracy. Also, the new Indian was sold the idea of being a cosmopolitan citizen if they could afford a certain kind of life. These advertisements created the myth of freedom and choice, and birthed a culture of entitlements. They significantly manipulated public discourse

that ceased to talk about issues of social justice by inundating the viewers or consumers with writings on lifestyle, home décor, travel and tourism. It is a manipulation of media to divert attention from pressing issues facing the nation. Lifestyle journalism, or sunny journalism as some would call it, became the new buzzword. This also led to the emergence of the page 3 phenomenon, which is now endemic. Chaudhuri closely examines these changes through her scrutiny of the *Times of India* post liberalisation which invented the page 3 culture. The presence of the page 3 culture further percolates to Indian television. Thus, the post-liberalisation Indian media unabashedly propagates market capitalism.

Post-liberalisation India also witnessed an increased visibility of women in media and explicit deployment of the term "feminism," which is understood in strictly corporate terms vis-à-vis the successful corporate woman or the high-powered consumer who can make a choice. It creates a warped idea of women's empowerment often exhibited through the overzealous celebrations of Women's Day by the Indian media every year. Many of these advertisements also attribute traits for the desirable Indian woman while remaining silent about the desirable Indian man. Here is a manifestation of a deeply conservative mindset. Besides, the media played a big role in the reinvention of Karva Chauth and Vastu Shastra through advertisements. The Indian family in these advertisements is representative of the valued aspects of Indian culture and tradition. The presence of old people in advertisements also peaked during this time and continue to do so even today. Chaudhuri questions the ideological nature of such representations and writes how often these have gone unnoticed. The conservatism that is manifested in media campaigns post liberalisation has led us to

our uniquely critical state. Chaudhuri deals with questions about equality, identifies the fissures in the Indian liberal state's attempted efforts to offer equality, and successfully demonstrates the ambiguity in intent and policy design.

It is common knowledge that post-liberalisation Indian media is also governed by private corporate interests and sponsorships. The distinction between advertisement and news is constantly blurring. There is a seismic shift in the role of the media, which has reoriented its focus by abandoning people's issues to serve the interests of a chosen few. The autonomy of media thus is significantly undermined. Sociologist Göran Therborn calls it the rule of capital, which runs counter to the rise of democracy. There is a sizeable growth of the Indian media post liberalisation, which should lead to a larger democratic participation, but that is clearly not the case. The expansion of the media has been used to legitimise neo-liberal capitalism in contemporary India. Edward S Herman and Robert W McChesney in their book *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (1998) discuss this phenomenon at length and also point out the ways in which global media are the new missionaries of corporate capitalism. Chaudhuri argues that the hyper visibility of women in the media and contemporary Indian popular culture is akin to the promotion of a neo-liberal ideology. It furthers evil corporate design of a compromised media in a country where there are more mobile phones than toilets.

Chaudhuri also examines the Nirbhaya incident to understand new methodologies of news dissemination. The growth of the anti-corruption movement that followed the Nirbhaya case relied largely on the support it received from the Indian media. While a party like AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) that was formed after this event and some of whose leaders gained prominence owing to their role in spearheading the anti-corruption campaign, often critiques business houses that meddle with state affairs, it should not be forgotten that its rise to eminence was facilitated through a set of private news channels owned and controlled by the business houses that it so often critiques.

This also demonstrates the unholy nexus that operates between media and politics in neo-liberal times.

Media and Electoral Campaigns

The 2014 general elections that led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a huge victory merit special scrutiny in the book. The role essayed by the media in these elections was rather unique. It created a public discourse that thrived on feel-good and hate-based nationalism. The year 2014 also marks a change in the overall Indian media landscape with reference to the media's brazen espousal of the ruling ideology and eliminating all criticism of the new government while citing nationalism as the panacea to all and sundry. The abject servitude of the media to the dominant political class is unprecedented in the history of independent India. The entire election campaign of the BJP revolved around governance and development to present a robust image of Narendra Modi. The elections also exposed the inefficiency of the Indian National Congress (INC) to engage with the media while their rival party milked it to the hilt. Even books like *Bal Narendra: Childhood Stories of Narendra Modi* chronicling the heroic deeds of Modi in his childhood were released in 2014 to penetrate a wide demography. This was a rather unique move from the electoral point of view. Also, lest we forget, the elections saw the entry of the British company Musion which was consulted for Modi's political campaign.

The general elections in 2014 turned a new chapter in election campaigning by effectively using the media machinery. After the elections, Prime Minister Modi stayed away from media interactions while communicating only through Twitter, programmes like Mann Ki Baat and interviews with a chosen few. These interviews were largely scripted paeon sessions, an extension of the fastidious publicity machinery to present an image of the committed Prime Minister. In many ways, Modi has also surpassed traditional media practices in his attempts to reach out to the people of the country. He is also a leader who thought about visual impact amongst other attributes of a

successful leader. Soon a lot of discussion was underway about his kurtas, jackets and other accessories. The Indian media crafted an image of a leader the country aspired to be led by. The election also referred to discussions on gender justice, which were soon abandoned after the poll victory. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP's ideological parent, is known for its conservative positions on women. The general elections in 2014 indicate a large-scale media manipulation to deflect attention from serious concerns or real issues at hand while peddling a nationalist rhetoric and presenting a leader who can save an otherwise distraught nation. The media was effectively managed to manufacture dissent to make way for the promised uprising. Many promises still remain unfulfilled, but the nation continues to be fed regular doses of nationalism. The 2019 elections that granted a second term to Prime Minister Modi indicate that nothing perhaps matters in the media-managed story of Modi's India.

In Conclusion

Chaudhuri's *Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse* is an important contribution to the existing scholarship on the neo-liberal Indian state and a transformed media paradigm. It successfully demonstrates the seismic shifts in Indian media by closely analysing various key changes in its role and function. It also illustrates Indian media's perennially conservative or often confused attitude to issues and questions concerning women's rights and gender. The book also eliminates all misconceptions about the neo-liberal Indian media's concerns for social justice by charting its calculated journey to embrace a corporate model that thrives on numbers and revenue. Freedom and credibility of the media are thus sacrificed at the altar of capitalist ideology. While many attempts have been made to analyse this phenomenon, Chaudhuri's book will be remembered as an important historical compendium of events which changed the Indian media ecosystem and public discourse forever.

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