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BOOK REVIEW

A Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship in India, 1930–1960*, New Delhi, Bloomsbury India, 2019, ISBN: HB: 978-9-3882-7195-0, e-book: 978-9-3882-7196-7.

The book under review raises very pertinent questions regarding women's contribution [what and how] in contextualising the idea of citizenship in India. It looks at how the intersection of nationalist and feminist politics of a particular time shapes citizenship. This book is a significant contribution in this regard from a feminist perspective, as it discusses the women's movements discourse and the diverse aspects of citizenship rights, which scrutinises the ways women dealt with realities on the practice of rights, especially when the modern state and modernity was getting shaped [later colonial period and post-colonial]. The concept of citizenship, along with the adoption of the constitution, was introduced as "rights-bearing" and "sex-neutral" instead of "sexless" idea, which, therefore, contradicted with Hindu social order, its traditions and customary practices regarding women's role. Annie Devenish endeavours to "document the establishment of citizenship in the early decades of the twentieth century, primarily as a negotiation between the feminists and the nationalists at the crossroad of the state". This book presents a historical review of the shaping and executing of citizenship from a women's rights perspective depending upon women's activism of the 1920s-1930s. It especially emphasises the negotiations of two prominent women organisations [All India Women's Conference and National Federation of Indian Women], which accentuate the agency of Indian women of that generation, highlighting the dialogue between the nationalists and feminists.

The organisation of the chapters underscores the theoretical temperament of citizenship. In the first chapter, "The Emergence of the Indian Woman as a Political Citizen", Devenish registers the Indian women as rights-holder individuals, dwelling upon the liberal concept of political citizen regardless of one's socio-economic conditions such as sex, caste, religion etc. However, homogenising diverse sections of women simply as "Indian Women" misinterprets the emancipatory vision of citizenship concept and accredits an already privileged section accessing more citizenship rights than those conditioned to sex and caste marginalities. Hence, it underscores the contested landscape in India.

Continuing it in the second chapter, "Constitution Writing and the Sexless Citizen" Devenish while scrutinising Nira Yuval-Davis's conceptualisation of citizenship as a "sense of belonging to the political community", addresses the ways Indian women could enlarge the connotation and scopes of citizenship for women during the 1930s-1940s, which however got diminished, within the constituent assembly debates, by the end of 1940s, credits to the prominence of the liberal concept of "sexless citizen" in constitution writing that allegedly limit women's belongingness to the political community.¹ This argument is, however, based on the misinterpretation of the constitutional debate. There is nothing like a sexless citizen in constitutional debates; instead, it is about making provision of not discriminating against any citizen for the reason of sex, caste, and religion. The feminists Devenish refers to in the chapter, while representing the global south standpoint, interrogated the abstract universalism of the concept of citizenship and accentuated the context-specific renderings of it. Citing Carol Pateman², the author describes the patriarchal and masculine attributes of liberal citizenship and expands it as a racial construct citing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.³ Until the early 20th century, the notion of citizenship was envisioned by the elite Indians accessible to the educated middle-class. This dilutes the true sense of citizenship since it has evolved as a process of entitlement. The moment the concept of citizenship approached the Indian landscape, it has already grown up to an egalitarian concept rather than an exclusionary model.

In Chapter Three, "Citizenship through Service", Devenish dwells upon the Gandhian perspective of citizenship, focusing on women's participation in the political process. By mentioning the political events during the 1920s-30s, the author contextualises the emergence of Gandhian

1 N Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (London: Sage, 2011), pp. 60-87.

2 C Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

3 GC Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In: P Williams and L Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

nationalism. The period when there was a swing in the nationalist agenda, from the piecemeal representation to the complete independence from British colonialism, relocated the citizenship discourse to the political rights and equality propounded in the Karachi Resolution in 1931. For Devenish, Gandhian nationalism not only reformulated citizenship as freedom from the material possession but accentuated the idea of “duty” as a citizenship attribute that was employed to persuade women to participate in the nationalist activities. Being an essential element in Hinduism and therefore familiar to Hindu women, the idea of “duty” worked well, bringing women into the political sphere.

Chapter Four, “The Reluctant Citizen”, and Chapter Six, “The Embodied Citizen”, are the crux of the book. In the former, the author highlights the plight of the partition, mentioning the issues of forced migration and communal violence, particularly gendered, with rape and abduction, to register women as a site of community’s honour, hence of revenge. In this chapter, the author discusses how Indian women’s citizenship rights were mediated through the religious lens, as the official process of rescuing such women, regardless of women’s own wishes. Both the Indian and Pakistani states uplifted the “national honour” upon the women’s desires. The mediation of citizenship through community identity diluted the implications of equal rights of women. This is the expansion of caste honour unique to this part of the world. In “The Embodied Citizen”, setting a different plot, Devenish brings the issue of birth control as a mechanism of controlling women’s bodies by the state. As discussed in chapter four, considering women as the physical and cultural bearers of the nation-state, by way of child-bearing and cultural identity, women’s sexuality is invested with the identity and honour of the community and therefore vulnerable. Through population control policies, the state penetrates and controls the bodies of the citizens and women in particular. However, the technology and knowledge accompanying such policies can provide an emancipatory agenda for women by empowering them to have greater control over their fertility. As Yuval Davis’s notion of “belongingness” has been capitalised through equal participation in the body politic.⁴ The feminist interventions consider the body as a site of power, and control over one’s body is fundamental to citizenship.

Chapter Five, “Citizenship through Struggle”, dwells upon the contribution of women’s organisations in defining the contours of the developmental state in India, and its interaction with the civil society, wherein women activists engaged with the state as the party itself. The author explains that liberal democracy ascribes citizenship in law, social welfare services, civic education

4 Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*.

and agitational politics, which are supposed to bring equality and empowerment. This perspective capitalised on drafting the Hindu code bill and subsequent legislative enactments. It, however, failed to achieve substantial citizenship without the state's effective execution. The last chapter, "The Indian Women as a Global Citizen", investigates the contribution of Indian women to an international platform, particularly in framing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In her book, Devenish analyses the intersectionality of nationalists and feminists as fundamental premises for showing the trajectory of citizenship. However, both of these categories are comprised of the upper-caste, particularly the Brahman caste, whose lives, conscience, ideas, writings and discourse, for example, reflect their caste allegiance. They universalised their experiences like that of the "Indian women", considering them a homogenous category, excluding the marginalised section of women's narratives from the "national" narrative. However, by bringing up the references from Sharmila Rege, Devenish endeavoured to balance this.⁵

Despite addressing all prominent events and registering a significant contribution in the citizenship discourse, certain questions remained unexplored in the book "Debating Women's Citizenship in India". For instance, how the women associated with the anti-caste collectives and movement approached and located themselves in predominantly the upper-caste women's organisations, AIWC and NFIW? While much attention was given to political affiliation, questions of caste remained unexplored, which is fundamental to understanding women's subjugation in India since women in India exist in a graded-inequality of caste system defined by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar as a cornerstone of women's question in India.⁶ To emphasise the religious dominance, the Shah Bano case is repeatedly mentioned in women rights discussions, whereas the Bhanwari Devi [gang-rape] case and subsequent court judgment show the atrocious caste character of the State institutions sidelined. The frameworks of religion, Hindu-Muslim, simplify the complicated structure of the Indian state that has the Brahmanical character to be specific. This remained untouched maybe because the literature, references, autobiographies, interviews, and the archival sources Devenish studied were coming from the ruling caste-class background.

5 S Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of "Difference" and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position", *EPW* 33 (44), 1998; S Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2006).

6 BR Ambedkar, "Castes in India: their Mechanism, Genesis and Development". In: *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Volume 1 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), pp. 3-22.