

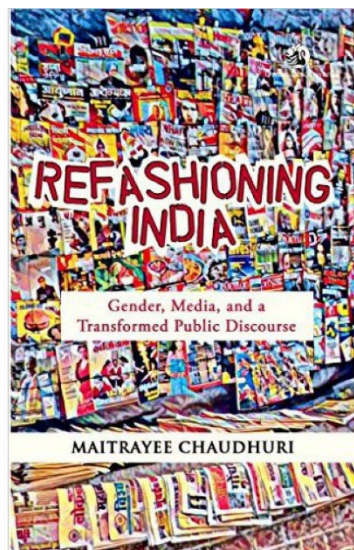
Doing Sociology

BUILDING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

BOOK REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2017): A Review by Pratichi Majumdar

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Published by Orient Blackswan in 2017, *Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse* by Maitrayee Chaudhuri tells the story of post-liberalisation India through an analysis of various media texts. The work brings together the issues of market, media and state, along with the dynamics of gender and public discourse. The author through this compilation of eleven essays, each examining a specific aspect of the media environment of the country at a particular point in time, shines a light on how the national identity is gendered and intertwined with global capitalism, and how the idea of India is continuously fashioned and 're-fashioned' within such political-economic relations.

Grounding itself in a historical context, the work begins with an examination of the pre-1991 state imagination of the role of women in a newly independent India. In Chapter 2, Chaudhuri analyses the 'First Plan Document on Women in India' published in 1947, highlighting how the identity of a new, post-colonial India was imagined and a blueprint laid out for nation-building. Women were to be 'useful citizens' and 'productive workers' in this new nation, while at the same time continuing to be the repository of 'culture' and 'tradition'. The essay brings out the contradictions within the document – between the role of the working-class woman as labour in developmental activities of the state and the emphasis on the responsibilities of the middle-class and bourgeois women within the domestic sphere; between promised drastic reforms in marriage and property rights for women and caveats in its execution; between 'planned economy' and 'private property'. Chapter 3 continues in a similar vein and looks at the state's framing of the role of women – as agents of development, as equal citizens and as cultural emblems. It traces how women's development schemes first began as an afterthought to the rural development programmes of the government and aimed not at the development of women as individuals but as domestic caregivers and mothers through programmes such as the 'Home Science Extension programme' and 'Applied Nutrition programme'. As a result, women were looked at not as individuals or equal citizens, but through the lens of the family and community. The author opines that though this led to a resurgence of radical women's movements in the 1970s, however, the economic liberalisation of the late 1980s meant the withdrawal of the state from protecting the rights of the marginalised and the practice of 'low-intensity democracy' (Chimni 1999, cited here p.75).

The book is organized chronologically, and the next few essays (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) look at print media in the 1990s and early 2000s, highlighting the changes in media discourse because of the 'shift' from a developmental state based in Gandhian and socialist ideals to a largely privatized economy. In this period, the national identity shifted from that of austerity to consumption and women as units of this consumption. While the 'Indian woman' continued to be seen as 'chaste', 'demure' and a nurturer for the family, she was now also a 'self-possessed career woman' (p.85). Thus, a divide between 'feminism of choice' and 'traditional feminism' became evident in the media discourses of the period. On the one hand, there was a consensus over demands for equality, and women's autonomy of choice; on the other, there

was a backlash against organised protests and women's movements believed to be rooted in the West. The author argues that this led to altering the very 'agenda of feminism itself' (p.23) to one that was comfortable with the rising Hindu right-wing politics, as well as a liberalized market economy, a 'corporate feminism' (p.116). The emphasis was on 'freedom' and 'choice' of the individual which was to be created through advertisements. However, the increasing role of sponsorship through adverts implies that the media starts being influenced by the sponsors and their rhetorics are promoted; thereby altering the public discourse.

In the next chapter, Chaudhuri looks at the representation of the family and shows how while sociology textbooks stick to the traditional textual notion of the Hindu joint family, market-research-based advertisements depict the changes in an urban family structure better. However, since the motive of such research is primarily to sell products, they fall outside of the sociological framework. Both academic 'knowledge' and 'ideas' from advertisements are shaped by and consequently further shape societal common sense. Continuing in this theme of 'tradition' and 'modernity', Chapter 8 speaks of the pull of two forces – corporate globalisation and subaltern assertions, in particular, the Dalit movement – and how both impinge into each other in contemporary India. The key argument in these chapters is to show how changes in the media discourse arising out of socio-economic changes, transform ideas of 'feminism', and 'nationalism' as well as the idea of the 'public' and 'public sphere' (Chapter 9). By praising the market and a transnational, primarily corporate-class diaspora, undermining the welfare state model both overtly and covertly, the media transforms not only the public discourse but also what is understood by the term public and who is considered a part of it. All this comes together in a 'hyper visibility' of gender (p. 229) discussed in Chapter 10, where the focus shifts from collective and organised movements for women's rights, to market-led notions of individual desires and goals.

The two final chapters discuss two key events in recent Indian history – the 'Nirbhaya rape case' of December 2012 and the General Elections of 2014 – and how media, especially new internet-based digital media, and discourses around gender became key aspects of both events. Chaudhuri suggests that in a globalised, liberalized economy, while there is a certain convergence of the 'global' and 'national' media discourse, there continue to remain some key differences between the two. In the national discourse about 'Nirbhaya', the main actors were those of the Indian nation – women's organisations, legal institutions, various sections of the Indian society, and the Indian state, each giving their take on the case. In the global media, the case was seen as primarily a failure of the Indian state and a contradiction with India's image as a rising economic power. The image of India that was presented was monolithic and one that played on traditional stereotypes. The role of the images and rhetoric presented by media becomes even more evident in the 2014 General Election campaign and the events since then. By tracking media discourse around the election and the following years, the author shows how the BJP used new media to build upon their on-ground campaigns of hyper-

nationalism and legitimise a 'new majoritarian hegemony' (p. 259). Here again, women's issues and gender remained buzzwords at the most and did not translate into actual organised efforts towards gender justice. This final chapter serves as an epilogue to depict how the image of India has been economically and culturally refashioned through media discourses on gender.

The work is an extremely important one in the current climate in that it highlights how an understanding of nationalism and gender is intertwined with media discourses informed by global capitalist structures. More importantly, it discusses how the mere visibility of 'gender' does not necessarily lead towards women's rights or gender justice. Particularly in today's world where media discourses impinge into public sensibilities almost every second, thanks to smartphones and cheap data prices, it is necessary to note how terms are appropriated and refurbished by market forces to serve their interests. Most interestingly, the book in its concluding chapters emphasises the growing hegemony of the ruling party over media, and how digital media can become the platform for rumours, gossip and post-truths. This has become even more important in the five years since the publication of the book. There is an increasing coalition between the market forces, the hyper-nationalist majoritarian state and media organisations. However, the book does not acknowledge that, in many cases, it is the internet that provides a platform, even if limited in scope, for alternative voices and challenges the dominating ideas of the 'nation' and 'public'. Also, while the term used is 'gender', it primarily sticks to the binary and leaves out other marginalised genders.

The book is a product of the author's continuous engagement, thorough observation and detailed analysis of a plethora of media texts over a quarter of a century. While it is a serious academic text, informed by the author's sociological perspective and ethnographic sensibility, it is written with enough clarity for an informed lay reader as well. The essays, while written at various points in time, flow together seamlessly, charting for us the transformations in the socio-politico-economic institutions of society and how it is linked with the media environment. Through its various tangents and discussions, it continuously drives home the linkages between nationalism and global capitalism, and how gender is interwoven into the relationship. In this, it is an extremely valuable piece of work.

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