

Exclusion and Representation in the Media Discourse

Social Change
51(4) 582–587, 2021
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DOI: 10.1177/00490857211040834
journals.sagepub.com/home/sch



Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2017, pp. 325, ₹895, ISBN: 9386689006 (*Hardback*).

The 1990s have been a turning point witnessing many changes that have affected Indian polity, economy and society. Many studies have analysed these changes from different angles—from the point of impact of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation on people’s lives at large; the emergence of a new middle class with new desires and aspirations and issues of poverty, economic disparities, unemployment going into the background, increasing the consolidation of rightist forces over Indian society and polity, the rise of identity politics and a highly polarised and communalised society.

The period is also marked by assertions and mobilisations by those who remained marginalised despite the socialist, secular and welfare rhetoric of the state. These assertions were not just raising the questions of their exclusion from development and governance processes, but they also questioned their exclusion from progressive movements which claimed to raise issues of equality, justice, freedoms and rights. The intersectionality of oppressions and the need to understand this intersectionality were pressed for a meaningful change within movements. Bringing caste to the centre of the discourse around class, gender, sexuality and patriarchy with a view to explaining their continuing marginalisations, violent abuse and grave poverty or looking at the issue of persons with disabilities as to how they have remained a totally neglected agenda in any movement or how the communal use of religion has systematically marginalised religious minorities or how tribal societies or the Northeastern states of the country have remained out of any public discourse and so on. Thus, although there was a questioning of exclusion of issues and representation of the marginalised from progressive movements, the need to emphasise issues of specificities and commonalities of oppression were raised.

Within the gender question too, the exclusion of different categories of women from the agenda, representation and organising strategies of social and progressive movements, including women’s movements, stressing the multiple social basis of subordination at the intersections of caste, disability, sexuality, religious, tribal and many other identities led to new forms of feminist organising. Significantly, in the last many years, voices at the intersections of these oppressions have made the Constitution of India the basis to assert their rights through its profound principles of socialism, secularism and fraternity enshrined in the Preamble of

the Constitution. They argued, ‘We, the people of India...’ in the preamble includes all of them and all of us together have to continue working towards making these ideals a reality. The struggles of persons with different sexual orientations, of sex workers, of people living on subsistence against the onslaught on their lands, forests and other livelihood resources, anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (anti-CAA) protests and framing their claims as citizens of the Indian nation need to be viewed as deepening and broadening of the understanding of our constitutional principles which are being reminded again and again through these assertions (see the statements issued by several organisations; LABIA, 2015; *Saheli*, 2014). In the anti-CAA protests too, protestors organised mass readings of the Preamble of the Constitution, and the movement itself was styled in the protest to protect the Constitution with *Samvidhaan Bachao* or Save the Constitution—a slogan that could be heard too often). Unfortunately, these assertions and claims did not find enough space in the print or the 24x7 electronic media.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri’s book, *Refashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse*, explores the reasons as to why and how the media, the fourth pillar of democracy, has lost its autonomous voice and is being controlled by the ruling classes and the powerful corporate world, supported by the ruling classes, and what is the result of this control over the public discourse that is dominated by the desires and aspirations of a new middle class. She makes gender the vantage point to understand this shift and also the nature and impact of this shift. In her in-depth analysis, she does not limit herself to the representation of women in the media. She analyses how this representation is carefully carved out of the progressive vocabulary of the feminist movements, but at the same time is not meant to disturb the traditional and cultural images of women.

The author focusses on the post-1990s, highlighting the tremendous growth and transformation of the media in the post-liberalisation period, emerging as the central site and ideological apparatus in the making of new social imagery of the Indian nation and the notion of gender. The interesting and beautiful part of her work is that it is written by someone who is a participant and an observer of everyday life in a changing India. All the chapters of the book have not been written at one point of time. The writings included in the book have been written over a period of about two-and-a-half decades, from the early 1990s up to 2017, mapping the changes resulting from the state’s new economic policies that led to a greater role of market, shifting the public discourse from self-reliance, equity and austerity to legitimate and unabashed consumerism, making consumerism desirable and acceptable. How did the media play a vital role in refashioning India’s public discourse through the vivacious role of advertising that emerged as an integral part of the growing dominance of market and corporate capitalism focussing primarily on the middle classes to maximise their profits? Chaudhuri also looks at other significant developments of the period: the rise of Hindutva forces, the assertions of marginalised sections of society and institutionalisation of the feminist movements leading to new political visions. The book details these disparate ideological processes and tries to understand how consumerism meshed, with ideas of individualism, empowerment and choices, paved the way for an instant feel-good culture and also aggressive nationalism.

The writer touches upon myriad concerns: cultural construction/recasting of gender that is always at the core of a nation-state's identity; legitimization of the decreasing role of the welfare state; the media's dependence on the market and corporate sector; an increasing control of political parties and the ruling dispensation on the media; the rapid growth of private power and influence over government policies; and the rise of the right in Indian politics with its decisive influence on transforming the public discourse away from the principles of secularism, harmony, equity and even democratic values. As she says, this is the story as much of gender and cultural constructions as it is of the changing nature of capitalism, nationalism and democracy.

Though mapping the period of the 1990s and after, it is the second chapter in the book that holds great significance as it unfolds the first founding report/document on gender titled, 'Women's Role in Planned Economy.' The report came out in 1938, was published in 1947 and rediscovered in the 1990s. It has generally been known for the radical recommendations about women's domestic work and women's agency and economic independence and rights in lieu of her domestic labour, an issue that still is a challenge for women's movements. Although the radicalness of the report in addressing issues that pertain to the private domestic sphere is undisputed, Chaudhuri's in-depth analysis highlights the biases and limits of the report through a gendered analysis of the public/private as discussed in the report. She argues that though the report bears an imprint of liberal and socialist ideas, these ideas whether about the 'nation' or about 'democracy' or 'citizenship' or 'family and property' are not much of a break from the earlier discourse on women's role in nation building. Hence, there is a continued tension between nationalistic pride in tradition and the modern commitment to change which the liberal and socialist paths were offering. The title of the chapter, 'Citizens, Workers, Emblems of Culture', by itself brings out these contestations after Independence, and it is the recasting of this vision that the subsequent chapters seek to map.

In the following chapter, Chaudhuri discusses how after Independence, the Indian state imagined the role of women in three major ways: as agents and recipients of development, as participants and equal citizens in the democratic state and as emblems of Indian culture. A reading of the post-Independence, five-year plan documents, though not part of this chapter/book, too points to this. A liberal state is formally committed to the political, economic and cultural rights of all citizens, but when it comes to women, the state tends to relate to them through family and community. And by the mid-1980s, especially after Roop Kanwar's sati and the Shah Bano case, there was a shrill ascendancy of rhetoric of women as cultural emblems of communities; feminists were attacked for being under the influence of the West; with an increasing debate on tradition versus modernity and rights of women as citizens and rights of religious minorities. Such a framing of the contours of debate resulted in the increasing control of communities, and men in communities, over women, further weakening women's position and autonomy in political, economic and cultural senses. At the same time, the conscious shift from socialistic goals to the freedom of market meant an increasing disinclination to allow the state to protect the weak and the marginalised. The state as a site of ideological production emphasising on the ideals of self-reliance,

equity and austerity gave way to a new public discourse, incorporating strong notions of individual achievement, pleasure and identity. With this, media became the dominant apparatus for ideological recasting where capitalism aided by the advertisement industry looked at people only as consumers. Chapter 4, about the gender images in the English print media post-1990s, looks at the shift in India's economic policy, accompanied by a shift in the media discourse with a strong emphasis on freedom and individuality, but not losing sight of tradition. Thus, there is a mix of tradition and modern with an emphasis on consumption and lavish lifestyles, displacing large sections of Indian women and men from the public discourse.

The rest of the book captures the story, using gender as a vantage point, as to how the media utilised popular and interactive expressions to legitimise a market and consumerist culture and shift the popular discourse away from poverty, inequality and state welfare to individual success and glamorous lifestyles. This displaced, or should we say, made large sections of poor, working class, tribal, peasant, dalit and other marginalised sections of men and women invisible from the public discourse. Confining herself to English-medium newspapers and magazines in the 1990s, Chaudhuri has tried to read the ideological meanings of these advertisements in the context of liberalising India, highlighting the difference of representations of men and women but not limiting it to that only. Very incisively she explores as to how the advertisement maker understands the emergence of the 'new Indian', as global and cosmopolitan, as a consumer of the product. So, the language of the advertisement is more about the consumer than the product to be consumed. Within this 'new Indian', different images of 'new man' and 'new woman' continue, and one has to refer back to the continuity of these exclusive and hegemonic images from the dominant discourse of social reform, nationalism and independent India's state policies. Thus, the new woman is simultaneously burdened as an emblem of culture and community. Freedom, choice, the assertion of autonomous selfhood and upward lifestyles are the buzzwords, effectively making the large masses of poor and marginalised invisible from the public eye, as if they do not exist at all. The media promoted ideas of choice, freedom, individuality, equality and pleasure by themselves exclusionary notions in the liberalised economy which thrived only on the consumptions of 10–15 per cent of an upwardly mobile middle-class population by changing the ideas, aspirations and ways of life of the middle class.

Coming to feminism in the media and advertisements, Chaudhuri points to the simultaneous co-option and backlash as she says, 'We are witnessing a worked-out attempt to redefine simultaneously a more traditional (read family oriented) and market friendly "feminism,"' (p. 118) and spells out the reasons why market research found it effective to simultaneously draw ideas from both the *domain of feminism* and *gender stereotypes*. Here the author also brings our attention as to how this attempt is in the interest of both the liberalised economy and resurgent majoritarian political movement. Thus, Chapters 6-10 talk of the unprecedented growth of the media amidst transformed structures of power in contemporary India, the media's critical role in transforming the public discourse, the media's financial dependence on corporate advertisements, drastic erosion

of its autonomy, ideological content of the media, its ideological defence of the market, its representation of family and images of woman/gender, and the role of a new set of firms which specialised in market research and communication. Chaudhuri argues that ‘the fast and thick flow of images and ideas on gender has therefore to be understood not as free-floating and self-propelled, an unintended consequence of new technologies in [a] globalized world, but as products of these agencies’ (p. 216). These agencies or firms specialising in market research, media training, publicity relations, management and advertising also created new normative visions of self and the nation. Gender, as an organising principle of society, works in tandem in expected ways with capitalism and nationalism.

Chapter 11 provides a thematic analysis of the national and global media discourse in the aftermath of the ‘Nirbhaya case’ and gives a comparative study of the two and argues that despite a growing convergence between the two, differences continued. The presence of this new media did give both national and international publicity to the issue of sexual violence against women, but questions on the nature of the coverage and whether this visibility led to more gender justice have remained unanswered. However, this unprecedented coverage in the media did lead to gender justice acquiring a central place in the 2014 general elections.

The last chapter of the book, which was freshly added, looks at the extraordinary role and use of media and communication in politics, the new hegemony of managerial language, initially a veiled and later a direct assault on the idea of a democratic, inclusive and plural India and the persistence uses of gender issues in the public discourse. The chapter looks at the changing relationship between the media and the new government, the making of a public discourse which in significant ways refashioned democratic and secular politics, and the representation of ‘national identity’ and assertion of ‘vacuous’ nationalism. There are many problematic areas that Chaudhuri is trying to highlight in this section. Of these, an important one is the manner in which a redefined feminism and gender entered the vocabulary of public discourse and were deployed widely by the state, civil society and the market. The other one is linked to the ruling BJP party that used the plank of gender justice to suit its agenda while the ideology of the party sits uneasy with gender justice. In her detailed analysis, she points out that with scarce exceptions ‘...the public discourse now seems to have succeeded in establishing a new state-led ideological hegemony’ (p. 282).

Maitrayee Chaudhuri’s work is in-depth and exhaustive. It is an insightful discussion on gender and cultural constructions and on the changing nature of capitalism, democracy and nationalism. She brings out the complexity of the issues facing us in the times of an over-communicative media and the manner in which the market and present ruling dispensation are controlling and using it to fulfil their own agendas. Her work is rich in analysis and the resources that she uses. Her sources, endnotes and references are detailed and exhaustive. The book is a useful addition to the existing literature on the themes of media, gender, society and politics.

Just a word on two or three aspects that could have entered the analysis. Although gender has been analysed in its binary, as representations of men and women, the representation of other identities has not been addressed. Even within this, the binary intersectionalities of caste, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and regions

do not find enough space in the analysis. In India, caste still structures a very dismal reality of the lives of people from the lower and dalit castes. Though there are mentions of the assertion of subaltern groups, the book does not go deep into analysing the nature of their presence or absence or rather the invisibilising of these categories in the media. Further, the mapping of transforming public discourse is primarily informed by the national English media. Nonetheless, we find that it is the Hindi or regional electronic and print media, because of its outreach, which has played a much bigger role in influencing and shaping the present public discourse. Is it that only the English and urban media still remain the mainstream? The alternate media that is raising its voice from the margins and is trying to bring into the public discourse different images of citizen and the nation has been totally left out. This by itself can be the subject for another research study.

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