

BOOK REVIEW

CITIZENSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS: AN INDIAN HISTORY

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BOOK: *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History* **AUTHOR:**
Niraja Gopal Jayal **YEAR:** 2013 **FORMAT:** Hardcover **EDITION:** First
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The book under review, among other issues, raises two very pertinent questions regarding the Constitutional and democratic processes in post-Independence India. Firstly, “unlike in the West where differentiated citizenship rights emerged in consolidated civic communities, the Indian recognition of rights accruing to collectivities rather than individuals occurred in a society which lacked the prior foundations of a civic community. It is not clear as to whether and to what extent community-mediated rights are compatible with a civic community if they precede the construction of the latter”¹. Secondly, it asks, “*the paradox is that social citizenship was at its weakest when the socialist rhetoric was at its peak, and has gained momentum in a policy environment that emphasizes state withdrawal from public provisioning. How and why these rights have emerged on the Indian political landscape in a time of ascendant neoliberalism, and increasing commodification of public services...*”².

The question of the emergent tension between ascriptive community identities and civic community, and the paradox of expansion of welfare during the rise of neoliberal economic order, are at the heart of understanding the story of what has happened to constitutional values and the project of social citizenship in India. However, the book would have made a more complex case

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¹ NIRAJA GOPAL JAYAL, *CITIZENSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS: AN INDIAN HISTORY* 19 (2013).

² *Id.*, at 164.

had it looked at the interface of all three processes together - between identity politics, civic community and the neoliberal economic order. The story of contemporary Indian politics is precisely the tension between these three dimensions. While identity politics has enormously helped in mobilizing and giving voice to some of the more marginalized communities, it has also degenerated into entrenched sectarianism and has perpetuated conflicts between the subaltern using the language of rights against each other. The idea of civic foundation while promoting a degree of constitutional values in public life and some dynamism into institutions, is increasingly taking the ugly turn of majoritarianism in the name of Hindu nationalism. Finally, neoliberal order while ushering in growth has, willy-nilly helped in expanding the social welfare frame, while hitting hard at the very foundations of civic solidarity and further dispossessing the marginalized groups that had marshaled culture and identity to regain space within the political community.

The question that really should concern us is whether or not the dynamism and the tension between these dimensions are proving to be productive for a democratic project in India? Or, on the contrary, is the assumed open-endedness of these processes converting into a new hegemonic order through a certain kind of a new combination between these processes? The book under review takes a more predictable and well known trajectory of the immense possibility of expansion of social citizenship through institutionalized Constitutional and institutional dynamics. I would argue, somewhat in contrast, that the breakdown of civic foundations is re-emerging through a stronger call of nationalism, patriotism and Hindu nationalism, which is actively aided, not contested, by the turn identity politics and the language of differentiated citizenship have taken over in the last two decades. The massive fragmentation of identities, intra-subaltern conflicts, and the use of rights language and its given competitive frame is making the majoritarian turn of the civic foundation increasingly attractive to the subaltern who hitherto spoke the language of differentiation, and heterogeneity. The subaltern now perceives her interests in the dominant project, while at the other extreme end of the political spectrum they have taken to militant politics that Jayal refers to in her chapter on backwardness. The subaltern is caught between *powerlessness and militancy*. It is in this context that neoliberalism adds its own distinct version of market fundamentalism to overbearing majoritarian religious fundamentalism. The story is one of indomitable convergence between these two kinds of fundamentalism that are specific to how one could approach the important questions that Jayal raises in her book.

Neoliberal order is simultaneously allowing for cultural assertion and economic dispossession. This in turn, often propels essentialism of cultural identities. What is being disallowed in economic terms is made good through a sense of cultural empowerment and cultural exclusion. Citizenship has always been as much a process of exclusion as it remains a means for inclusion.

Citizenship in liberal discourse draws more from the contractual tradition imbricated in *quid pro quo* action rather than substantive solidarity. Social contract simply put, is the social version of contractualism - exchange relations - of the market. It is therefore not a surprise that the citizen-subject is seamlessly merging into the consumer-subject. In fact, citizenship today makes sense more in terms consumption patterns and service-delivery rather than the language of equality and fraternity.

The story only becomes more complex when one finds epistemic roots of the rights discourse too in the competitive logic of the market. What is the missing link therefore, is 'class abatement' of the citizenship project as T.H. Marshall had argued in 1950s. Instead, we have witnessed the expansion of the governmental mechanisms at the cost of participatory ethos, reducing participation to what Partha Chatterjee refers to as 'contextual negotiation', as the only survival strategy viable for the subaltern; though Chatterjee speaks in an affirmative tone of finding subaltern agency in these microscopic activities of the subaltern. It is therefore understandable, as Jayal rightly points out that, "it is deeply ironical that the moment of active citizenship coincides with a denial of the legitimacy of politics"³. While the political itself remains extremely constrained, we are witnessing attempts to replace or subsume it under a new moral and social language of the civil society over not so civil or civic conditions of our everyday reality.

³ NIRAJA GOPAL JAYAL, *CITIZENSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS: AN INDIAN HISTORY* 282 (2013).