

Book Review

Gendering Hindu Nationalism

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Vijayan, Prem Kumar. 2020. *Gender and Hindu Nationalism: Understanding Masculine Hegemony*. London and New York: Routledge. £120.00, pp. 221+xii

In the ever burgeoning scholarship on nationalism, it is widely acknowledged that from its iconography to identity politics, gender is an integral aspect of ideologies and processes of nationalism. Hindu nationalism in India is no exception. Prem Kumar Vijayan's *Gender and Hindu Nationalism: Understanding Masculine Hegemony* is a timely and thought provoking contribution to the growing body of scholarly work investigating this nexus. It weaves the broad historical sweep of nationalism in India and events of contemporary significance into its analytical architectonics and narrative arc with great agility to make sharply articulated political claims backed by sound scholastic evidence and reasoning.

Much of the extant literature locates the systems of dominance accruing out of the articulation of gender and Hindu nationalism in hegemonic masculinity. Vijayan, on the other hand, contends that we need to invert and understand this dominance in terms of *masculine hegemony*. This according to him permits us to understand the operation of "hegemonic power of specific hegemonic masculinities" (p.49) across a cross-section of specific modes of dominance such as caste, class, race or religion. The novelty and unique contribution of this book is premised on this fundamental inversion. He holds that, "we must understand hegemonic masculinities as the gendered articulations of dominance within individual modes, and the multiple modes of

dominance through which these are articulated as together constituting the larger patriarchal formation, or ‘masculine hegemony’” (ibid).

The perpetuation of this masculine hegemony is possible because of the investment of each mode in maintaining its logic of hegemonic masculinity, bolstered by violence or the threat of violence (both physical and symbolic). Since each specific mode in which hegemonic masculinity operates contributes to the overall logic of masculine hegemony, it becomes a pervasive and pernicious system of dominance, which forms the explanatory fulcrum of the rise of “Hindutva masculinities”. (p.61) Thus, “in one sense, this book is about the journey of ‘Hindu’ nationalism from its inception to this particular moment, when it appears to be on the cusp of realizing the ‘Hindu’ nation as a nation-state” (p.64). This framework serves to locate the “‘arrival’ of the ‘Hindu’ nation” (ibid) in terms of an evolving dynamics of masculine hegemonies rather than positing this phenomenon as a realization of a fully formed vision right at its origins. Thus, in this book masculine dominance as an explanatory trope not only helps us map the structural configuration of political power but also to understand many a socio-political events and processes of contemporary history of India - such as the Emergency, the centralization of power in the figure of Indira Gandhi, the compromises and accommodations between big bourgeoisie and the rural elite, and the politics of development- which paved the way for the current phase of Hindutva nationalism. Posited thus, masculine hegemony, unlike hegemonic masculinity generates a more nuanced understanding of Brahmanical elite at work in and through history.

This book forcefully articulates the view that there is more to the emergence and consolidation of Hindu right-wing political parties than the rise of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva masculinities. It traces the source springs of this phenomenon to the entrenched modes of masculine hegemony in Indian society which contribute to the continuity of Brahmanical hegemonic masculinity presented as civilizational essence. It rightly identifies family and familial imagination as the primary institutional locus of this entrenched masculine hegemony which reproduces gender relationships and draws a homology with the nation understood as Fatherland in the right-wing ideology of the nation as a Hindu patriarchate. To draw attention to the family as a fundamental site of the reproduction of ideologies of hegemonic masculinity gains significance because family both in its concreteness and as a metaphor is the most enduring site where masculinities and femininities are produced and reproduced.

A constitutive element in Vijayan’s analysis of masculine hegemonies is their essential instability, “even as masculine hegemonies entered into contestation and/or negotiation, the fundamentally gendered quality of the hegemonies (as masculine) were never challenged or questioned” (p.161), as instanced in the Shah Bano case, the Hindu Code Bill, Indira Gandhi’s rise to a leader anointed as ‘Mother Indira’, “wherein the figure of the (widowed) mother is mythically and hierarchically endowed with great power” (ibid).

However, such an analysis lends itself to demonstrate the close relationship between masculine hegemony and the acquisition and consolidation of social and political power. Thus, the identity of the nation-state as predominantly Hindu becomes merely coincidental, the appropriation and consolidation of state power by Brahmanical elite patriarchal formations being paramount. Perhaps then, in order to bring out the workings of masculine hegemony and the resistance to it, it would be instructive to investigate these complex processes as a struggle for state power and controlling the discourse, where Hindu nationalist discourse becomes significant in the country's political history as a result of specific conjunctures. Thus, while masculine hegemony works well as a heuristic tool in understanding the rise of Hindu right-wing politics in India, it doesn't foretell the future trajectories of the nation based on such an explanation.

In his analysis, as a prognosis for the future, Vijayan avers, "the increasing polarization of the polity is a sign that the control over it exercised by Brahmanical masculine hegemony is breaking, that this hegemony itself is in crisis" (p.210), and the collisions between the two poles "are likely to be increasingly determined by the scale, extent of concentration, and mobilization of, on the one hand, wealth, arms, and control over state-machinery around one pole, and, on the other hand, of growing cynicism, marginalization, and the resistance to that marginalization by the destitute and despairing (both armed and peaceful), around the other pole" (p. 211). As recent events in the political history of India attest, the resistance to Brahmanical masculine hegemony is being played out on the streets, predominantly by women who are not only challenging the values of that hegemony but also scripting an alternative discourse for imagining familial bonds, right to their bodies, and most significantly, "the right to have rights".

A fine blend of history, theory and political critique, *Gender and Hindu Nationalism: Understanding Masculine Hegemony* is a valuable addition to contemporary critical writing on India. By demonstrating the interconnections between various modes of dominance by the one common thread of masculine hegemony, Vijayan provides us with ways of seeing the continuities in the inner workings through which elite Brahmanical patriarchal formations control social, economic and political power. By laying bare the dialectic between the nature of the Indian state and the nature of the social, Vijayan points to a malaise that besets politics irrespective of ideology. That surely is not a comfortable image to hold on to. What we need in order to mitigate the limitations of macro-scale theorizing are more contextualized studies on issues of representation, contestation, and localized meaning-making, because as "imagined communities", nations and nationalist ideologies are *ongoing* projects of hegemonic discourses; and resistance to masculine hegemonies are likely to manifest in the realm of the social, where they are produced in the first instance. We are perhaps at the cusp of witnessing such shifts in the power of masculine hegemonies if recent events in India are any indication. The future

of India will perhaps not be decided by “which pole will break first” (p.211), but how both poles are forced to confront the slow but steady incremental resistances in an interconnected world.