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Book Review: Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS women as Ideologues

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Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS women as Ideologues. Paola Bacchetta. 2004. New Delhi: Women Unlimited (an associate of Kali for Women¹). pp. 144. \$10.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by: Anu Sabhlok²

Recent years have seen an increasingly sophisticated scholarship on the relationship between gender and nationalism. Feminist scholars have critiqued gender blind studies of nationalism and pointed out the mutual construction of gendered and national identities³. However, studies on women as active agents, especially within fundamentalist religious and nationalist movements, remain few⁴ and Paola Bacchetta's work fills this gap. Paola Bacchetta is an associate professor of Women's Studies at University of California, Berkeley and has published numerous articles on women's involvement in political conflict, as well as within nationalist and religious movements. She is also co-editor of a volume titled *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*.

In her recent book *Gender in the Hindu Nation* she presents three essays that speak to the role and representation of, and by women within the Hindu Nationalist discourse. *Hindutva*, a Hindu nationalist movement, is an ideology that claims India to be a Hindu nation and positions itself in opposition to Muslims and Christians in India. Hindutva politics has been implicated in violent anti-Muslim riots in India and critiqued by feminists for its upper-caste Brahminical patriarchy. Why would women participate in a movement that constructs them as subordinate? In answering this question, Paola Bacchetta's book dispels the notion that women, when active in nationalist movements, follow the ideologies of their male counterparts. Instead, Bacchetta argues that women produce a specifically feminine discourse of the nation, which at times has "zones of convergence, of antagonistic divergence, complementary difference and antagonistic difference" with the male nationalist discourses and thus, the two cannot be reduced to one (3).

Bacchetta focuses her inquiry on the two major Hindu nationalist organizations, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (hereafter RSS) and its women's wing the *Rashtriya Sevika Samiti* (hereafter Samiti). While the RSS, which is exclusively male, older, more powerful and with a much higher position in the hierarchy of the *Sangh Parivar* (family of Hindu Nationalist Organizations), provides the movement's framework and discursive unity, the Samiti, nevertheless, creatively inserts its own symbolism and signifiers, modifying and creating a discourse that appeals to women. Through careful and detailed analysis of RSS and Samiti texts, as well as discussions with members of both organizations, Bacchetta declares that even when "women and men struggle for what

¹ Kali for Women is Asia's first explicitly feminist publishing house and was started in 1984 in Delhi by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon. Kali for Women now has split into two feminist publishing houses; Zubaan and Women Unlimited.

² Anu Sabhlok is a PhD Candidate in Geography and Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

³ There is now a vast and growing scholarship on this subject. For some of the earlier works on gendered nationalisms see Kumari Jayawardhena, 1986. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, Zed books, London . Nira Yuval-Davis and Flovia Anthias, 1989. *Women-Nation-State*; St. Martin's Press; New York, and Andrew Parker et al., eds. 1992, *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. Routledge. New York and London.

⁴ Some of the important works in this area include Andrea Dworkin, 1983, *Right-Wing Women*, Women's Press, London, and Kathleen Blee. 1991. *Women of the Klan*. University of California Press.

they collectively call a 'Hindu Nation' they do not necessarily have the same entity in mind" (4).

Gender in the Hindu Nation is part of a series titled "Feminist Fineprint" that offers edited volumes of essays on a single issue, from a critical feminist perspective. In the first essay, titled "Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues," Bacchetta introduces the RSS and the Samiti through the literature of their respective organizations. Bacchetta reveals the complex and often contradictory imaginings of the Hindu nation in how it is described by the RSS and the Samiti. The materials Bacchetta uses for this analysis are Hindi and English language texts published by the RSS and the Samiti since 1925. While parts of her analysis are based on conversations with members of the two organizations (especially in the second essay), Bacchetta primarily concentrates on the texts, because "publications represent the most fixed, least transient forms of discourses in the face of their respective dodging operations"(p. 15). By critically and chronologically analyzing the publications, she is able to draw out the shifting discourses as they relate to different time periods in Indian history, disparities between the English and Hindi language texts as they focus on different audiences, and convergences/divergences between the texts of the men's and the women's organizations. For example, the English and the Hindi language Samiti texts present divergent explanations for Samiti's origins. The English language text, which targeted middle class women, discussed the "western impact" and the "potential of Hindu femininity to stray into feminism," thus leading to the "disintegration of family." On the other hand, the Hindi language text, which targeted lower and lower middle class women, discussed violence by men and the need for women to fight back. Bacchetta's textual analysis reveals how the Samiti selectively appropriates from varied sources, including ancient Hindu texts, colonial historiography, and feminist writings, often effacing all traces of these sources.

Bacchetta's study demonstrates how women define citizenship and agency for themselves within ideological structures that seek to constrain women's agency. The second essay, titled "All our goddesses are armed," serves to situate the Hindu nationalist discourse in a particular place (Ahmedabad, Gujarat) and to show the various ways in which notions of self and identity are defined and articulated by a particular Samiti member (Kamlabehn). Bacchetta's textual analysis is accompanied by a rich description of her interviews (over four years) with Kamlabehn, a committed Samiti member. Kamlabehn's articulation of the "Muslim as other" and a "threat to Hindu women" creates a space for her within Hindu nationalism, which Kamlabehn uses to justify her paramilitary training and her non-feminine dress sense. Bacchetta points to the significance of the missing *swayam* (self) from the name of the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (in comparison to the Rashtriya *Swayamsevak* Sangh) for while a "man's self is individual", that of the woman implies "not only the individual self but also family, society, nation, religion and culture." Samiti women, however, subvert the RSS's notion of women as "chaste mothers" and represent women as "protectors of society" and as a "source of power capable of destroying evil." In her presentation of versions and subversions of Hindu nationalist discourses, Bacchetta lays out the complex territory that defines gendered subjectivities within the two organizations. In the last essay, titled "Communal Property/Sexual Property," she points to the construction of Muslim women as either "baby factories," "prostitutes" or "victims of the violent Muslim male" in the RSS literature, which uses an array of genres, styles and rhetorical devices for strategic

purposes. Ultimately Muslim women become the object through which Hindu masculinity is defined either as the “savior” who marries the Muslim woman or as the “preserver of Hindu purity” by humiliating and desecrating her.

My own research focuses on an ethnographic analysis of Samiti’s disaster relief and service roles in Gujarat⁵, which is also Bacchetta’s research site. Paola Bacchetta’s textual analysis and well researched introduction to the role of Hindu Nationalist women serves as an excellent secondary material for researchers. This book will also make a good assigned reading for any discussion of women’s right-wing activism, or simply to illustrate the contradictions involved in claiming “women” as a universal category and as the subject of feminism. As a geographer, I find Bacchetta’s work useful in her discussion of symbolic space and its scalar manifestations. The vivid descriptions of Kamlabehn’s spatial im/mobility and manipulation of public/private space in the second essay are of particular interest to feminist geographers engaged in deconstructing binaries and understanding the social construction of space.

I am intrigued by some of the theoretical connections that Bacchetta alludes to, particularly Bakhtin’s notion of performative discourse, and I would like to see a further elaboration of these in her future work. While the three essays in *Gender and the Hindu Nation*, offer a wealth of information and critical analysis of the symbolic dimensions of Hindu nationalist discourse, I also would have liked to see an effort to connect these through an introduction and conclusion section. Since the three essays stand as separate entities, there are parts of the book that become repetitive, particularly where Bacchetta needs to (re)introduce the organizations and the context. Bacchetta does a great job at the end of each essay in contextualizing the Hindu nationalist movement in comparison with other historical and contemporary movements around the world. However, there is a need for a concluding essay that also contextualizes her study within the recent cultural and political developments in India, specially the 2002 Gujarat carnage. Nevertheless, the book serves as an essential background reading for anyone interested in studying contemporary nationalist movements in South Asia. Bacchetta’s work is also extremely useful for its focus on the processes that explain the mobilization of women for religious fundamentalism and their own negotiations of the gendered construction of the nation. It is a rich, textured and timely addition to the feminist literature on nationalism.

⁵ Gujarat is a state in western India and shares a border with Pakistan. Gujarat has had a series of natural disasters including a cyclone (1999) and an earthquake (2001) in the past few years and is also known for recurring Hindu-Muslim riots. Of particular significance is the recent one in 2002 that led to the killing of at least a 1000 Muslims and the forced migration of people from both communities into relief camps. Many organizations including the RSS and Samiti are engaged in relief operations, of course within the confines of their ideology.