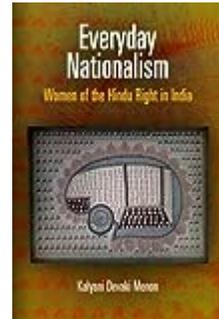




Kalyani Devaki Menon. *Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 224 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4196-9.



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Published on H-Asia (May, 2011)

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Kale on Menon *Women of the Hindu Right*

In *Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India*, Kalyani Devaki Menon provides us with a rich ethnographic account of the mechanisms, tactics, and ideologies by which Hindu nationalist organizations build their support among Indian women in the communities in and around India's national capital, Delhi. The subject matter continues to be timely, for despite the sidelining of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party from the center stage of national politics in India, Hindu nationalism in its cultural, social, as well as political variants continues to thrive in India. [1] The focus in this book on women is equally welcome as part of a larger body of scholarship that seeks to disaggregate the Hindu nationalist movement to understand how its various constituents operate alongside and sometimes against each other.

Menon conducted a year-long ethnography among individuals working in the Delhi chapters of several Hindu nationalist organizations: the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the women's organization directly linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh; the Durga Vahini

and Matri Shakti, women's organizations related to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad; the Mahila Morcha, the women's affiliate of the Bharatiya Janata Party; and Sewa Bharati, a social service organization that in Delhi concentrates mostly on providing educational and vocational training to Delhi's poor urban communities. Her sustained interactions with forty-five women and ten men in the movement take her from ordinary chapter meetings to specialized retreats and nationalist rallies full of incendiary speeches. Her ethnography among her mostly middle-class and upper-caste participants attends to the everyday constructions of ideology and politics through which activists garner support at the grassroots level. To this end, she looks at how individual members and organizations use history, religion, politics, and social work to articulate the everyday fears, desires, needs, and interests of diverse groups with the movement's goals (p. 5).

While Menon is interested in the pluralism of the Hindu nationalist movement itself, a quality that rests at the heart of the movement's expansionary strate-

giesâ (p. 5), her potentially more significant contribution is the examination of moments when individuals become what she calls âdissonant subjects,â transgressing the norms of the movement. In these moments, Menon sees an opportunity to examine âeveryday acts that complicate our analysis of Hindu nationalist subjectsâ (p. 3), in particular the ability of movement leaders and movement structures to variously overlook, discipline, or incorporate dissonance. Menon engages these theoretical issues of Hindu nationalismâs pluralism and the role of dissonant subjects in her introductory chapter. The subsequent chapters are organized around the movementâs uses of historical narratives, the language of fear, a twinning of religious and political duty, volunteerism, and the use of games and fun. These are all examples of the common practices by which movement leaders inspire new recruits and instill a normative agenda, and Menon provides a valuable ethnographic snapshot of these everyday acts.

Menon notes that at times the normative emphasis among these womenâs organizations is distinct from hegemonic Hindu nationalist discourses. Menon argues that it is through an accommodation of ideological or normative pluralism that the movement has been able to grow substantially among Indian women, as well as among other groups who might otherwise be alienated by rigidly enforced hegemonic and patriarchal norms. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Menonâs analysis in chapter 1, where she takes up the subject of âeveryday histories.â For example, in most dominant Hindu nationalist narratives, the seventeenth-century Maratha king Shivaji is valorized as the epitome of a righteous Hindu ruler and the progenitor of the modern Hindu nation. However, Menon finds that among the women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the figure of Jijabai, Shivajiâs mother, is the generative force for a newly awakened Hindu politics in the early seventeenth century, an âarchitect of the Hindu Nationâ (p. 47). The stories that circulate around Jijabai underscore the central role of motherhood for Menonâs interlocutors, one that allows individual women to make a deep impact on public, political events through the private choices they make for themselves, and most importantly, for their children.

In chapters 2 and 3, Menon interrogates the uses of fear and insecurity in the garnering of new recruits and the justification of certain kinds of social work. For example, in one conversation with a member of Sewa Bharati, we hear the position that the Hindu nationalist movementâs education outreach among Delhiâs lower-income communities is essential to counter-

ing the threats that conversion poses from minority religions, particularly Christianity. In the subsequent chapter, Menon examines the productive uses made of fears of Pakistan during the Kargil war. In her analysis of the speeches of female ascetics like Sadhvi Rithambara, Menon argues that it is âtheir dual status as renouncers and as women that makes these *sadhvis* such effective voices for the values, morals, and politics of the movementâ (p. 82).

While chapter 3 draws from her fieldwork experiences at rallies and other significant occasions, Menonâs book is strongest and most illuminating when it takes us into the everyday world of work and play. In chapter 4, Menon presents material from her fieldwork among women in social service organizations. In the first part of the chapter Menon accompanies two VHP social workers in their volunteer time in the obstetric and gynecology unit of one of Delhiâs government hospitals. The two women play critical mediating roles for the largely poor, illiterate, and inexperienced patient population seeking prenatal attention. They routinely serve as stenographers, helping patients to input information for hospital registration, and in some cases they function as triage nurses, determining which patients require attention and which will most likely be sent home by the hospital staff. Here we get a more grounded sense of the vital social work that is done by individuals and organizations of the Hindu Right and how this work connects to the expansion of the movement among new communities.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to a singular event, a weekend retreat, or *shivir*, organized by the Rashtra Sevika Samiti with the imperative to recruit new members. Organized games and play, physical exercises and drills, lectures, prayer, and patriotic songs structure the dayâs activities, all with the aim to position new recruits âtoward the cultural politics of the movementâ (p. 131). Games and play are particularly apt strategies to âdisseminate these ideas because they are able to convey Hindu nationalist constructions of history, politics, and morality without raising the hackles of those who might otherwise disagree with themâ (p. 155).

Menon gives us a very good sense of the ideology and practices of the organizations and individuals with whom she interacts. There are a few places, however, where the reader might have wished for additional or perhaps different kinds of information to make sense of the larger argument. Among the occasions in which members of the Hindu nationalist movement become dissonant subjects we have the opening vignette, in which Ela, a vol-

unteer in Sewa Bharati, expresses the opinion that it is meaningless to build a temple to Ram on the blood of so many Indians (p. 1). This view sits at odds with Ela's own family history in the RSS, her own long-standing association with Sewa Bharati, and the focal nature of the efforts to build a temple at the former site of the Babri Masjid for the Hindu nationalist movement over the last several decades. Similarly, we hear that another Hindu nationalist, Vimla, doubts the authenticity of female renunciates, who merely have to look spiritual (p. 102) to be granted a life of wealth and luxury. Again, given *sadhvis*'s privileged position of deference and authority in the movement, and their importance to some of the arguments of Menon's book, Vimla's views seem jarring.

Menon's focus on dissonance in the introductory chapter of the book alerts the reader to pay closer attention to the narratives of such moments, and her theoretical survey of this concept is valuable and provocative. However, as the book unfolds, its rich ethnographic documentation geared toward dissonance is not supplemented by a continued engagement with this vital idea. While episodes of dissonance like the ones described above are inherently interesting, there seems to be less rigorous pursuit of the questions surrounding these moments: How do individuals themselves understand their transgression of the movement's norms? Are there potentially more radical consequences to this dis-

sonance? Could such moments of dissonance constitute the germ for a potential subversion of hegemonic positions? Menon's book comes at a time when the broad swath of the Hindu Right is in a moment of reinvention, and this work is therefore timely and important in this context. It is an important contribution to the discussion of Hindu nationalism, and its emphasis on the everyday practices of nationalist organizations helps to clarify the movement's expansion outside of its early upper-caste and middle-class support base into lower-caste and lower-class communities and especially through gender as both a dissonant and a resonant category of experience for members of the Hindu Right. Menon has given us a rich view of women in the Hindu Right of northern India, and whatever questions she leaves unanswered are perhaps stimulants for new research agendas.

Note

[1]. In the 2009 Indian parliamentary elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party won 116 seats, enough to secure its position as the second largest political party after the centrist Indian National Congress, which won 206 seats. The BJP has a substantial political following in a number of state governments as well. Among the most populous states where it functions either as the sole party in power or as a coalition partner are Gujarat, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Jharkhand.

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Citation: Sunila Kale. Review of Menon, Kalyani Devaki, *Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

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