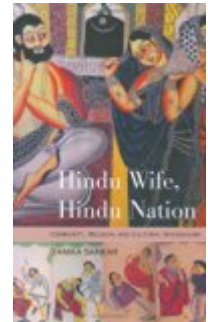


Tanika Sarkar. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. viii + 290 pp. \$37.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-34046-7.



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Gender, Patriarchy, and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century India

The nine essays included in Tanika Sarkar's book, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, contribute to an important set of scholarly debates over the relationship between imperialism, patriarchy, and nationalism in late-nineteenth-century colonial India. Drawing on a wide range of popular texts and literary sources, Sarkar utilizes both feminist methodology and post-colonial theory to place social and cultural discussions about women's status under the British colonial rule at the center of the story concerning the early movement for Indian independence. The book focuses primarily on Bengal where Sarkar traces the beginnings of what she calls a "Hindu cultural nationalism" that starts to replace a liberal reform tradition by the late nineteenth century (p. 1). Tracing the ideological origins of this "revivalist-nationalist" tradition, she argues, remains crucial to understanding contemporary Indian politics, particularly in regard to the status of women and the problem of contemporary Hindu-Muslim violence (p. 191).

Sarkar's introduction poses the question that informs the rest of the book, "How is it that the Bengali intelligentsia turned away so firmly from liberal reformism to Hindu revivalism later in the century" (p. 7)? During this period, the Hindu middle classes moved "quite decisively towards a Hindu indigenism and nationalism, from a more socially-questioning and self-critical earlier era" (pp. 1-2). Both material and ideological changes in Indian society influenced this shift. After 1870, middle-class landholders found themselves squeezed by British colonial policies that limited their access to markets and reified patriarchal tenet-landlord relationships. Sarkar understands the insecure status of the Bengali middle classes during this period as playing a crucial role in causing "a self-critical and self-changing liberal intelligentsia into a closed, status-quoist, chauvinistic one" that retreated into an authoritarian Hindu revivalism (p. 11).

The shift to a revivalist-nationalist tradition had important implications regarding the status of women in Indian society. In chapter 2, Sarkar traces the making of the Bengali public sphere

and how the idea of the nation becomes embodied in a rigid Hindu patriarchy. Later chapters make it clear that women play an important role in this construction of Indian national identity. Sarkar's reading of women's autobiographies from this period reveals the effect that Hindu revivalism had in enforcing patriarchal relationships. Emasculated by colonialism, Indian men could exercise autonomy only within the one place that the colonial apparatus could not touch: the home. It is in this chapter that Sarkar's strong agenda comes through. "A Book of Her Own, A Life of Her Own" uses women's own voices to restore women's agency within the context of the nationalist struggle. In contrast to writers such as Partha Chatterjee, Sarkar asks the reader to view women as actors rather than as mere symbols used by nationalists to represent an uncorrupted spiritual realm.[1]

To understand the intellectual origins and contemporary legacy of the revivalist-nationalist tradition, Sarkar turns to a discussion of the writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya in chapters 4 and 5. Her positioning of Bankimchandra as a mediating voice between Hindu revivalists and Bengali liberal reformers provides the basis for a critique of how Hindu womanhood comes to represent the "locus of unconquered purity" for nationalists (p. 143). Sarkar explores the implication of this new positioning of Hindu womanhood as an authentic representation of Indian freedom in the following chapters on age-of-consent legislation that attempted to restrict the practice of child marriage. Household conjugality, she claims, comes to represent the "last independent space left to the colonized Hindu" (p. 198). The importance of women in the nationalist imagination makes it possible for them to emerge in the chapter entitled "Nationalist Iconography" as potent symbols of "the unviolated, chaste, inner space" of the nation that needed to be protected by Indian patriarchy from the corrupting influence of the colonizer (p. 265).

One of the most important contributions of this book is Sarkar's critique of modern Cultural Studies. Sarkar's chapter 6, "Conjugality and Hindu Nationalism," and Edward Said's chapter 7, "Orientalism," deal with the debates over the age of consent. The chapters offer an insightful critique of Subaltern Studies from a feminist perspective. Said's observations, Sarkar argues, eliminate the possibility of the agency of the subject since all power derives from a fixed and hegemonic Western power structure: "The assumption that colonialism had wiped out all past histories of patriarchal domination, replacing them neatly and exclusively with Western forms of gender relations, has naturally led to an exclusive identification of patriarchy in India with the project of liberal reform" (p. 193). For Sarkar, this results in a dangerous form of indigenism that legitimates all forms of power as authentically Indian as long as they are seen to exist in opposition to a fixed and unchanging British colonial authority.

Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation will prove essential reading for scholars interested in Subaltern Studies, South Asian history, and Feminist Studies. Sarkar's work also provides an historical lens through which to view contemporary Indian society. Her final chapter, "Aspects of Contemporary Hindutva Theology," serves as a sort of epilogue and addresses the problem of communalism and violence in modern-day India by analyzing its relationship to the revivalist-nationalist tradition. Although this chapter proves a provocative ending to the book, it leaves the reader wondering how the multiple strands of the story of Hindu revivalism that Sarkar traces in the preceding chapters came to dominate Indian politics for over one hundred years. The two original essays that accompany the seven previously published articles in this volume could have been more closely integrated through stronger transitions and the elimination of some repetition. A concluding chapter along with an index and bibliography also would

have helped to further enhance the usefulness and readability of this important collection.

Note

[1]. Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women*, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 238-239.

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