

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04361-9 - Gender in South Asia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities
Subhadra Mitra Channa
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Gender in South Asia

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
4381/4, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi 110002, India

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107043619

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First published 2013

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Channa, Subhadra, 1951-

Gender in South Asia: social imagination and constructed realities/Subhadra Mitra Channa.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: "Discusses gender in terms of models generalizing upon received wisdom from
historical and cultural sources and lived realities"--Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-107-04361-9 (hardback)

1. Women--India--Social conditions. 2. Women--India--History. 3. Feminism--India. I. Title.
HQ1742.C485 2013

305.40954--dc23

2013010246

ISBN 978-1-107-04361-9 Hardback

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*To the Memory of
the two most important women in my life
My Mother, Basanti Mitra
My Mother-in-law, Jeevan Devi Channa*

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Preface

The idea for this book was initiated at a colloquium in the University of South Carolina where I presented a paper on dalit women in India. After a long-drawn question and answer session, several scholars asked me if I had written a book about Indian women, and that I should put most of my knowledge together and make it available inside one cover. The ideas expressed in this book have taken shape over many years. When, as a young PhD student, I went to work among the low-caste washermen community, in the narrow lanes and by lanes of Old Delhi, I realized that the lives of their women were very different from my own; yet, I could communicate with them as a person, as a human being and also, as a woman, and the many conversations I had over several years of my fieldwork have remained with me. At that time, my curriculum had not included anything on gender and my work had focused on economic aspects of their lives.

As my own life experience and my field experiences increased over time, I began to think more and more on gendered lines. Several questions have come up again and again in the discourse on gender: is there a common feminine experience? Does the feminine transcend intersections of other social and political criteria like class, ethnicity and race? Does it include or exclude the notion of sexuality? In other words, irrespective of their sexual preference, are all women, women at some deep and essential level? Does being a woman mean that one is grounded in biological sex, or is it a free-floating category that assumes various meanings in multiple contexts?

To a large extent, the Western feminists have centralized sexuality within the definition of gender. My experience with women across the globe, however, has informed me that the essence of the feminine is irrespective of sexuality. As a woman, one can communicate with other women at a level that excludes the male; and this is an experiential interface, a part of the lived existence of women, not to do with thinking about the category called 'woman'. There is also the ethos of common humanity that cuts across all other differentiation. But where are the roots of difference? What makes one life way different from the other and more importantly, where are the lines of difference or the boundaries drawn?

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In my encounter with Western feminists, it became clear that I was encountering different philosophies of life and that some very internalized South Asian values were not found in the West and vice versa. This inspired me to examine more closely what it meant to be a woman in South Asia. But even within South Asia, women are certainly not the same; but here the differences are not so much in the metaphysical roots but in the everyday realities of existence. Just like Western feminism is divided along the axes of race, class and ethnicity, South Asia has its own division along caste, class and ethnicity, which situates men and women within a variegated life experience. In this book, I have explored but left unanswered most of the questions that I began with. I do not even think that all questions can be answered, but what I may have achieved is to get across some ideas about being a woman in South Asia. I have also attempted to put forth a sketch of the historical constructions of womanhood and the dynamics of differentiations and their intersections with cosmology and ground-level social realities

Although my work focuses on South Asia, the theoretical paradigms and inspirations have been drawn from the immense work done by Western feminists and theoreticians of gender. But I was equally inspired by the stories and narratives of my mother and other family members, including my mother-in-law. The literature and popular culture of India has provided me with many insights. I have also drawn significant inspiration from the works of South Asian women scholars and indigenous literature. It can be that I may not be able to mention all of them in my work, but a work such as this is built up on the groundwork prepared by scholars, living women in many parts of India and the world, who have at some time or the other touched my life, and the received wisdom of many generations of women and men. Known or unknown, I am indebted to all of them.

My mother was a great storyteller and had a great quality of narrating stories with vivid descriptions which made people and events come alive before me. In my childhood we did not have television, but long afternoons and leisurely time was spent in talking and listening to a variety of stories. We also did not have air conditioning so the hot summer nights were spent by the entire family sleeping out in the open, and we would talk deep into the night under the bright starry skies. While doing fieldwork in many parts of India, I met so many women, each with their own stories and views, which remain imprinted on my mind; their faces and voices are forever etched into my memories. My mother-in-law came from an entirely different region of South Asia, from the North-West, and her stories opened up an unknown

world to me. She supported me throughout my graduate studies and made it possible for a young mother with two children to continue to study.

The colleagues and fellow scholars who have inspired me and given me courage to get along with my work, supported me and given me confidence to write and speak out my thoughts are scattered across the world. I owe a lot to my friend and inspiration, Professor Faye Harrison who is now in Florida, a scholar of immense depth and commitment from whom I learnt how to work and evolve myself as a scholar. Her book, *Outsider Within*, was especially helpful to me in this project. My friend, Professor Kelly Alley, gave me the opportunity to spend a semester at Auburn University and learn about American culture among other things. I owe much to my friend, Professor Ann Kingsolver, who not only provided me with love, care and understanding but also academic inspiration, support and avenues to get recognition for my work. It was while spending a year at the University of South Carolina, as a scholar-in-residence, that I was encouraged to write this book.

For the present, I want to thank Dr Antu Saha, who was my student but now is a scholar in his own right and who has worked hard on editing the manuscript. My daughter, Navya, read several chapters and provided very useful comments. Both my daughters have been the reason why life and work has remained pleasurable. They have given me the strength to go on even when the going has been tough. Their understanding and willingness to support me in my academic pursuits has finally enabled me to achieve a modest success in the form of this book.