



## Digital diasporas: labor and affect in gendered Indian digital publics

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Digital diasporas: labor and affect in gendered Indian digital publics,**

Radhika Gajjala, New York, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019, 280 pp., \$32.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78348-116-3

With the proliferation of technology and the rise of social media and other digital platforms, South Asians today are more connected than ever, especially online. In her latest ethnographic venture, *Digital Diasporas*, which explores how South Asians communicate online, Radhika Gajjala, shows that digital platforms enable South Asians from different parts of the world to immerse themselves in global digital environments which also afford opportunities to emphasize certain geographic and cultural positions. As new narratives of how South Asians—especially people from the Indian subcontinent—use the internet to connect, share and protest emerge, Gajjala, examines the ethos and character of South Asian diasporas through a feminist participatory lens, delving into how South Asian identity is negotiated in spaces mediated by technology and how notions of gender play out. Gajjala explains that such identities are influenced by offline as well as online intersections, especially when associated with what is commonly perceived to be “Indian,” “digital” and “diasporic” (11). But as she emphasizes, these are not mutually exclusive; rather they are deeply connected.

The conceptual issues around the intersecting of domestic space and the digital public space through Indian digital diasporic contexts are explored by investigating existing literature and the rich, in-depth interviews conducted. From the start, Gajjala, makes clear that she is not seeking to critically define the notion of “public” since those definitions already have too much of a neocolonial and Eurocentric orientation that does not help expand our understandings of what constitutes public in marginalized societies. Instead, she engages with the work of Habermas as analyzed by scholars like Amit Rai, Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner to develop a more nuanced understanding of “public” in the context of South Asian diasporas online, especially in terms of its implications for women, and in particular those who have been traditionally marginalized.

Drawing on the framework of the public and the private as binary—giving the home (private) and the world (public) a feminist rearticulation, in ways different from the western feminist conceptualization of the private and the public—Gajjala’s nuanced introspection into the binary of the *ghar* (home and private) and the *bahir* (the world and public) do not coincide exactly with the public and private as western feminism posits it to be. Feminist, intersectional and transnational in her examination of the South Asian diaspora online, Gajjala employs an incisive exploration of labor and the facets of the gendered digital public to make clear that the digital and the domestic work in tandem with ideologies of the domestic space, which is predominantly considered a women’s space in South Asian ideology. And it is this identical ideological stance that today merges and normalizes the Indian as the Hindu; conflating the religious and national. Gajjala does not shy away from exploring some of the most burning and yet understudied questions that the increasing online presence of South Asians—and in particular Indians—have re-emphasized in recent times.

With the proliferation of Hindu nationalism online, as well as the resurgent #MeToo movement and other important hashtag feminist protests like #Whyloiter and the rise of Dalit Twitter, there is an increasing focus on intersectional analyses of gender and caste. It is this engagement with caste and other deeply uncomfortable questions around the Savarna (high

caste) woman and the ways caste can co-opt social movements, repressing with casual nonchalance the Dalit and lower caste woman's voice and presence, that makes Gajjala's work extremely important in enhancing our understanding of the character and workings of such mediated spaces, and the process and nature of feminism in India. For the poor and low caste woman, identity is still very much a matter of negotiation with the higher caste and higher-class woman. How, then does this affect the notion of being allies to those perceived to be weaker? After all the internet was meant to be a great equalizer where all voices would have a chance to be heard. As one of interviewees critically points out, offers of help are made when movements are high profile and provide an opportunity for folk to exhibit allyship; but "where are these lawyers when Dalit women are raped and killed?" (25).

Using a collaborative feminist approach of dialogic interventions to break the idea of single hegemonic voices, has helped Gajjala parse out the gradient subtleties that define identities, especially religious ones. This also ensures that her participants and interviewees are co-authors and collaborators. The author's constant grappling with ideas as the participants speak provides a deeply intimate atmosphere where readers can gradually see the subjects emerge. About a third of the 75 interviews that she conducted for the book were with Muslim participants—identifiable as Muslims only when they refer to an app to mark dawn and evening during periods of fasting. As the participants show, inclusion in movements, seemingly meant for all women, are actually extremely conditional. The interviews reveal that non-Savarna participants, mostly hidden in for example the #MeToo movement, are generally welcomed in digital domesticity, but only through tropes of motherhood and domesticity.

The casteist nature of various social media movements is emphasized through the trenchant examples Gajjala's participants share. As she states says, depending on who is interviewed, the feeling of safety and how protected women feel online shifts. This also provides an interesting angle to the author's candid self-reflexivity during which she explores why she did not ask if her participants were cis gender, or choose interviewees based on religion, caste or sexuality. Gajjala has a rare ability to interrogate her discomfort and, in the process, forces the reader to grapple with an idea of Indian feminism online that is clearly a site of enormous contradictions. Gajjala seeks to extend various arguments around notions of what constitutes Indian national identities and, in particular, those of the diaspora and the digital by examining how technologically mediated diasporas occur and are characterized by both online and offline interactions, the nature of global markets and the interactive qualities of such technologies. But she goes much beyond to show, in Ila Nagar's words, that in India queer digital activism a great place for visualizing queer bodies but it is not ideal utopia it is often framed to be (16).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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