

Citizenship in India not gender-neutral, ASU professor asserts

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It is known as the world's most populous democracy. And India can point to a record of women in leadership roles, including prime minister and president, multiple female leaders of prominent political parties, a reservation system guaranteeing women 33 percent of village council seats, and a growing female voter turnout.

But a closer examination reveals Indian democracy to be at risk because of the gendered nature of citizenship, according to Natasha Behl, assistant professor of political science in Arizona State University's New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences. New College is the core college on ASU's West campus.

Behl's article "Situated citizenship: understanding Sikh citizenship through women's exclusion" was published in the journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. The article is based on dozens of face-to-face interviews Behl conducted with male and female members of the Sikh faith in India's Punjab state.

Behl is a Punjabi-Sikh woman born in the U.S. to immigrant parents from Punjab. "In part, I came to this research project on the tension between women's integration into the world's largest democracy and their exclusion from public space because of my own violent encounter in Punjab at a public cremation ground, where my grandmother's Sikh funeral was held," she explained.

In 2005 Behl was spending the summer conducting research in Punjab

when her grandmother passed away. Behl attended the funeral, which took place without incident until Behl followed along with the group of people accompanying her grandmother's body to the funeral pyre. Behl suddenly found herself being forcibly restrained by an older woman who told her that she would "cause harm by being here." A man unknown to Behl finally stepped in and freed her from the woman's grasp.

"I was utterly shocked," she said. "How could I cause harm? Whom would I cause harm to? Why did my gender mark me as the source of potential harm? And why did my gender mark me as vulnerable to physical violence?"

This incident illustrates the gap between the abstract promise of equal citizenship and the lived experience of citizenship in India, Behl said. "We often think of citizenship rights as determined by the constitution, which in the Indian case guarantees gender equality. However, even when formal institutions and documents guarantee equality, citizenship rights are interpreted, experienced and enforced by individuals at the local level."

One aspect of Indian democracy that is unfamiliar to most Americans is the concept of personal law, a legacy of British colonial administration. Four religious communities – majority Hindu and minority Muslim, Christian and Parsi – have their own personal laws. Other religious groups, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain, are subsumed under Hindu personal law. No one may opt out of a religious identity, and therefore no one is exempt from personal law. Proponents of personal law claim that it secures religious difference, Behl said.

"Personal law associated with India's religious communities shapes every aspect of a woman's life – her status at birth; her capacity to own, inherit and manage property; her freedom to work, marry, divorce and remarry; and her relationship with her children," she said. "Personal law

effectively suspends Indian women's most basic rights on behalf of group rights. The issue of personal law divides women on multiple fronts – between their respective [religious communities](#), between civil rights and minority rights, and between gender equality and minority claims for recognition."

The interviews Behl conducted for the "Situated citizenship" article document situations including a disconnect between property and inheritance rights for women, which in theory are legally protected, and the reality in the community. "Practically speaking, girls don't receive any land from their parents, and they don't receive any land from their in-laws," one interviewee told her.

Behl also found a striking difference between the way men and women described their participation in civic life. "Men's discussion of associational life did not include geographical restriction, concern about transportation, or fear about safety," she wrote in the article. "Fear about safety significantly undermines women's ability to move freely, to use public spaces, and to participate in associational life, the labor market, and educational life."

Fear for one's safety is easy to understand, given widely publicized incidents like one in Delhi in 2012, during which a 23-year-old student was gang-raped on a public bus and later died from her injuries. Behl's "Situated citizenship" article includes an interview with a 65-year-old woman who blames women's failure to dress in "proper" attire for turning men into "hunters."

Behl uses the term "exclusionary inclusion" to describe the situation faced by Sikh women in India. She developed this term, indicating a situation in which inclusion exists alongside discriminatory practices, with her dissertation adviser at UCLA, Raymond Rocco, through years of collaborative discussion, teaching and writing. In his recent book,

"Transforming Citizenship," Rocco examines political, cultural and economic exclusions of Latinos in the United States, and argues that these constitute a pattern of exclusionary inclusion.

"I make sense of Sikh women's experience of citizenship and argue that their experience constitutes a pattern of exclusionary inclusion, where [women](#) are included in formal democratic institutions, but always on a limited basis because their inclusion is determined by the intersection between gender and other categories of difference," Behl said. "The concept of exclusionary inclusion is helpful because it captures the cultural, social and political practices that constitute lived citizenship for different groups in different contexts, including Latinos in the U.S. and Sikhs in India. The concept helps to explain how individuals in different contexts experience citizenship's inclusionary/exclusionary dynamics."

"Dr. Behl and her research are representative of a bright young cohort of scholars we have attracted to ASU who are tackling socially relevant issues in thoughtful and innovative ways," said Jeffrey Kassing, director of New College's School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. "Her work contributes to a strong tradition in the school of undertaking scholarly work that focuses on issues of social justice."

"I decided to join the New College at ASU, in part, because I am committed to providing a small liberal arts education to all students irrespective of their socio-economic background," Behl said. "ASU is one of the few institutions in the nation that truly serves the public by providing a quality education that is accessible to all students. ASU's mission and New College's commitment to the small liberal arts reflects my commitment to mentoring, teaching and serving those who are underrepresented in higher education."

In addition to her role in New College, Behl is a faculty affiliate with the School of Social Transformation on ASU's Tempe campus. She teaches

courses including Global Feminisms, Comparative Politics, Politics of India and Everyday Forms of Political Resistance.

More information: "Situated citizenship: understanding Sikh citizenship through women's exclusion." *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 2014 [DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2014.927775](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2014.927775)

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