

## Book Reviews

# Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India

Raka Ray

Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India, Kali for Women: 2000, New Delhi, India

Raka Ray's book is about the political and cultural contexts under which women organize to form movements to stand for their rights and dignity. Ray compares women activists and women's movements in two of India's metropolitan cities, Bombay and Calcutta. Her analysis is rooted in the concept of *political fields* which she uses instead of political opportunity structure approach. This is to give due recognition to the crucial role of cultural factors and the relational nature of action. A field, according to Ray, 'can be thought of as a structured, unequal and socially constructed environment within which organisations are embedded and to which organisations and activists constantly respond' (pp. 6). She writes that fields may vary with respect to two analytically distinct factors. One is distribution of power (pattern of concentration or dispersal of forces within the field) and the other being political culture (acceptable and legitimate ways of doing politics in a given field).

Political field includes the state, political parties, and social movement organisations, which are connected to each other in both friendly and antagonistic ways. Some of their elements are more intense than others and all these are tied together by the presence of a particular culture. Within these political fields may be found even smaller more localized political subfields. Ray refers to the critical or oppositional subfields as the *protest fields*. These consist of groups and networks that oppose those which are powerful in the formal political arena but may or may not share with them the logic of politics in the broader political field even though it is constraining for them. Social movements thus are seen as embedded within protest fields which are in turn embedded in the wider political field. Further explaining the terms 'political culture' and 'distribution of power' Ray clarifies that political cultures are not seamless or monolithic but a 'contested terrain, with insiders and outsiders, dominant and subordinate, countercultural and oppositional forms'. Political cultures can also be characterised in terms of degree of homogeneity and may become both constraining and enabling for social movements.

Heterogeneous political cultures are more flexible according to Ray and thus allow the co-existence of multiple and even oppositional discourses. They readily incorporate new ideas too. Homogenous cultures, on the other hand, are seen having one dominant discourse. Thus they are rigid, monolithic and also intolerant of difference. Thus it becomes much more difficult to change them through a movement. In terms of distribution of power, fields can be concentrated or dispersed. This further depends upon the strength and number of individual actors as well as the asymmetries amongst them. When a field has a concentration of power, it becomes more difficult for newer groups to enter it as the initial cost of this entry is much higher in comparison to more dispersed fields where both exit and entry may be easier. Raka Ray formulates the following typology of political fields (pp. 11):

		CULTURE	
		<i>Heterogeneous</i>	<i>Homogeneous</i>
POWER	Dispersed	Fragmented	Pluralist
	Concentrated	Segmented	Hegemonic

She argues that movements emerge from being embedded in political fields which decide the shape, substance and range of possibilities of actions as well as the outcome of a movement. In Calcutta, the women’s movement inhabits a hegemonic field with a concentration of power and a homogenous culture while in Bombay the same is situated in a dispersed, heterogeneous and fluid field. Ray argues that women experience similar levels of poverty, inequality and violence in both the cities and yet on account of being situated in different kinds of political fields, their collective actions acquire different shapes. In Calcutta, the predominant issues become employment and poverty, literacy and skill acquisition, and even women’s own ideology which is seen as a constraint. In Bombay, on the other hand, violence against women vastly overshadows other issues and is followed by fundamentalism, employment and poverty and also concerns about the family. Ray says that in Bombay women activists seem more clearly in tune with the second wave of feminism in the U.S. and Europe as the movement appears to cater to women’s strategic gender interest. On the other hand the movement in Calcutta appears to cater to women’s practical gender interests as the activists there tend to challenge the state and economy much more than they challenge men and family.

Raka Ray presents the demographic characteristics with labour force participation of women, levels of poverty and violence against women in the two cities of Bombay and Calcutta. The socio- economic account of the two cities shows that the differences between them are not significant enough for giving effect to fundamental differences in women’s movements. Most of the women in both cities are Hindu and thus face the ideas of Hindu orthodoxy and consequently similar forms of discrimination. Women in both the states also have a history of participation in social movements and being actively involved in the fight for female suffrage. Maharashtrian women such as Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade had campaigned for women’s education and a better life for widows. In Bengal, Swarnakumari Devi, Kadambini Ganguli and Abala Bose had struggled with similar ideas and issues.

of political fields as seen in Ray's analysis can be called a kind of political determinism. Though Ray acknowledges that different ways of articulation of women's issues in different organisations is also a result of the ideological positioning of the organisation yet one may get the feeling that she undermines the 'social' in a movement by placing a decisive role in the hands of the political culture as well as in the distribution of power in the field of its location. This analysis also seems to have missed out on the possibility of a movement transforming the very nature of a political field. Thus, the analytical examination of the dialectic between collective action and political mobilisation remains incomplete.

Despite having similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics and a history of activism, women in Bombay and Calcutta participate in women's movement with different approaches. Ray attributes this to the different types of political landscape of these two cities. In the aftermath of Emergency, argues Ray, while CPI(M) came to power and grew stronger in Calcutta, a vacuum was created in Bombay. The period also marks the growth of movement politics and emergence of a non-party sector (autonomous groups) which filled the vacuum in Bombay according to Ray. Thus in Calcutta, women's interests became predominantly organized through the ruling CPI(M) but in Bombay, they were primarily articulated and organized through a new type of associations which were the autonomous women's organizations.

In Calcutta, Ray mentions the case of two women's associations, one dominant and another subordinate, in her analysis. Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti (PBGMS) became the dominant group which is the women's front of the CPI(M). The Samiti functions under the shadow of the party and women's issues are raised in accordance with the ideological positioning of the party. Thus instead of 'feminism' which has the risk of alienating men, 'class oppression' is the term used by PBGMS activists. The slogan 'personal is political' does not find much appeal in Calcutta, says Ray. Sachetana, the subordinate group, is an autonomous organisation not linked to any party. Its members consider themselves as feminists and seem more open about conflicts within the household. The issues raised by Sachetana activists are closer to women's gender interests but the political culture of Calcutta constrains the organisation and its working. Thus it is rarely openly critical of the CPI(M) and its distinctive ideology often puts Sachetana on the defensive. It also gets trapped in resource constraints apart from those coming from the political culture of Calcutta.

In Bombay also Ray analyzes the functioning of two organisations. Forum Against Oppression of Women being the dominant and Janwadi Mahila Sangathan (JMS) as the subordinate one. Ray opines that unlike Calcutta, heterogeneity, fluidity and multiplicity characterise Bombay's political culture. To this is added the legitimacy of autonomous groups and identity-based collective organization in Bombay's protest field. Bombay's women's movement therefore becomes a site of constant change and conflict. The political culture allows and facilitates the co-existence of both Forum and JMS. JMS being the women's wing of CPI(M), gets tied to party politics in the same way as PBGMS. But its existence in Bombay's political field along with the weakness of CPI(M) there, changes the dynamic these two different kind of organizations. Its position is however not as weak as that of Sachetana in Calcutta and its activists thus approach the party on a basis of equality. The Forum on the other hand is a partially dominant organisation within a fragmented field. Ray says that it has been able to change the universe of political discourse around gender. The Forum is open to ideas from many directions including national and international feminist communities. The Forum's competent activists and ability to easily access media have enabled it to represent its views on sexuality, reproductive technologies and violence against women before the public in ways that may not be called hegemonic but nonetheless have influenced many people.

Thus it is illustrated by Raka Ray that political fields are responsible for the differences in the course of emergence of women's movements which are embedded as protest fields in the larger framework of the politics in a region. While reading Ray's book one is left wondering whether the significance