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Maitrayee Chaudhuri, in this book, brings together a constellation of her papers published in the past three decades. The book also includes a fresh and final chapter on 2014 elections and its aftermath which works as a conclusive demonstration of all its key arguments. True to the title, Chaudhuri provides a ‘national’ English media-driven story of how India—both as a ‘nation-state’ and as a ‘public discourse”—was refashioned and mediatised with the advent of the neo-liberal regime. She points out that the changing avatar of media has made it an ideological apparatus, a dominant tool in this project of refashioning. Gender is approached as a critical ‘vantage point’ that can aptly flesh out these changes. Throughout the book, Maitrayee Chaudhuri argues from an intersection of gender, media and nation to sift social, political and economic changes.

She convinces the reader that the emerging managerial language of media utilises a variety of popular, inclusive and interactive expressions to legitimise the market and consequently delegitimise the welfarist, interventionist state or shift its commitments (from equity to national security; from real to abstract). The ‘ordinary’ and ‘local’ are made visible in media platforms apparently marking a shift in what and who constitutes the ‘public’. However, such an expansion in the idea of the ‘public’ does not translate easily into deliberative democracy (Chapter 9) nor does increased visibility lead to justice (Chapter 11). Chaudhuri focusses on the discursive processes which entail such transformations. She argues that the distinction between advertisements on one hand and news, features and stories on the other hand has increasingly blurred. With the shift in language, advertisements convey a worldview of plurality based on individual differences in taste and choice. Social commitments are posed against individual choices. She identifies that the most obvious transformation has been the apparent proliferation of choices that an individual has, and the less obvious of the changes has been the increasing media control through advertisements. This process is part of a larger consumer ideology which makes feminism one of its many tangible ingredients. The emergence of a ‘high-powered
consumer’ corporate woman is symptomatic of this ideology, Chaudhuri argues (Chapter 5). This ‘new woman’ is also simultaneously burdened as an emblem of culture and community.

She identifies the rise of a global middle class of both resident and non-resident Indians as crucial to the process of neo-liberal consumption and transformation of public discourse. In fact, the entire book can be understood as a synoptic biography of the Indian middle class and its emerging transnational networks. However, one finds no convincing discussion on how this middle class was historically constituted or connected to the national elite which shaped the dominant meanings of India. This connection would have been significant, as the author consistently tries to draw a marked contrast between how ‘India’ was imagined and discoursed in pre- and post-liberalisation times (Chapters 2, 3, 8 and 12). Further, building such a connection could have provincialised the middle classes in their dominant demographic integers, castes, linguistic and regional affiliations, lending it a face. One does find certain searching or leading points when the author quotes Patricia Uberoi to distinguish the emergent middle-class diaspora from the working-class (largely lower and mixed-caste) diaspora of indentured labour migration (p. 204). Similarly, the author does mention elsewhere that a ‘new middle class’ and ‘powerful middle-castes’ have emerged from certain governmental policies, again marking a tangential distinction (p. 182).

The anatomy of the book needs special mention. It begins with a chronological and contextual reading of the national planning committee and its subcommittee on women titled ‘Women’s Role in Planned Economy’ (henceforth WRPE) in Chapter 2. The chapters that follow, juxtapose old, new and changing discourses on women, men, family, state (on how free market is conjoined with family and state underlining its naturalness), women’s movement (changing meanings and uses of ‘feminism’) and nationalism informed by media discourses, neo-liberal consumption and an unequal economy of knowledge. The concluding chapters, 11 and 12, operate as direct and contemporary examples of these changes. In Chapter 2, the author lucidly captures the conflicts which informed the nationalist combined vision (crystallised in WRPE) which embodied simultaneous pressures of contemporary dominant ideological debates, tensions and ambiguities. The author rightly places such visions within the intellectual turmoil of a largely upper-caste middle class (drawn from business and zamindari classes). Such an
emplacement clearly reveals how the largest section of the polity did not find any decisive role in writing or planning the nation. In other words, they did not decide the ‘idea’ of India. It would have been absorbing to explore the historical exchanges and responses of contemporaneous non-Brahmin, backward class, Pasmanda, depressed classes publics to this ‘national’ assemblage of planners and visionaries. Thus, beyond the ideological conflicts within a largely upper-caste national elites, one may also benefit from conflicts which clearly lie outside and in opposition. However, Chapter 2 in particular and the entire book do show a sense of hesitation in openly dealing with the critical category of caste as a historical producer of competing social visions and discourses. One would have appreciated the book further if there would have been an attempt to centrally recognise the persistence of Dalit–Bahujan visions as counter-hegemonic to both upper-caste social reforms and nationalist discourses. Is this hesitation integral to academic attempts which try to tell us a national story?

In the book, the timeline which maps the refashioning of India is largely informed by the National English Media, with a sprinkling of Hindi electronic media. The author underlines the influence of English readership in India. She points out the ‘self-proclaimed exclusiveness and simultaneous claim of an all India reach’ of English media, making it an essential part of ‘a pattern of development intrinsic to globalization’. It would be interesting to investigate the place of vernacular public discourses within such a timeline and arrangement. Do they work in tandem with this national English discourse? Alternatively, would they tell us different stories of refashioning? How does one fathom the relationship between national and regional publics? Can they be easily colluded? Second, the near absolute distinction drawn between pre- and post-liberalisation times makes the study of social continuity a major casualty. For example, in Chapter 8, the author argues that in pre-liberalised India, even studying the middle class was considered ‘unworthy or a self-indulgent topic’ for the ‘social scientist’s mandate was to act on behalf of the people who constituted the nation’. Drawing from Mary E. John, she argues how production is no longer ‘a definitive identity’ for India, whereas in a different time, ‘the working class woman was a national icon’ (p. 200). Clearly, the author alludes that the national subject has undergone a shift—the middle class has ‘appropriated’ the national stage. She consequently pushes the idea that ‘working-classes’ were central to the symbolic economy of pre-liberalisation days, though she clearly explains the contradictions between symbolism and state policies. Going back to the problem of the category of middle class, it would be significant to investigate whether the middle class has
appropriated the national stage or simply reorganised and expanded itself with changing times, thus making a case for continuity.

This book would be an interesting read for students of media, gender and society as it brings together a sociologist’s intellectual labour to understand a new order that implicates all of us. The book also underlines the imminent challenges faced by women’s movement and other progressive struggles in a changing media eco-system.

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In the Introduction section (Chapters 1–32) of the book, *Comic Performance in Pakistan: The Bhānd*, Claire Pamment defines the character of a bhānd as a folk character who belongs to the urban theatre of Punjab. She emphasises their cultural discrimination and their struggle for legitimacy and authenticity while also challenging the social and economic hierarchies. Pamment also traces the historical origins of bhānds through Indian Punjab, Delhi, Kashmir and Pakistan. She debates that bhānds belong to Muslim religion and often cross ethnic boundaries by being part of the political gatherings and weddings in the disguise of faqirs and Sufis or bahrupiya, mirasi and naqli.

In Part I of this book, she traces the genealogies of bhānds. She identifies bhānds learning from the oral tradition of Mirasis as they perform in high and low statuses. The ancestors of the present-day bhānds, according to Pamment, entered India through the Muslim courts of Persia. In this respect, there are definite Arbo-Persian influences on these characters. In her view, their strength lies in being aware of histories, and when ill-treated by the higher class, they tend to disclose these histories through their performances (p. 8).

Identifying the ‘bhānd mode’, Pamment suggests that these characters shift from ‘jester like appearances in the company of Kings and Emporers’, being the official court entertainers, to pleasing the noblemen and empowered figures to street performers and comic theatre