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## Gender, citizenship, and identity in the Indian blogosphere: Writing the everyday

by Sumana Kasturi, 2019, London and New York, Routledge, 208 pp., £96.00 hardback, £29.59 e-book ISBN 9781138500037 hardback, ISBN 9780429342011 e-book

**Aditya Deshbandhu**

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Gender, Citizenship, and Identity in the Indian Blogosphere: Writing the Everyday**, by Sumana Kasturi, 2019, London and New York, Routledge, 208 pp., £96.00 hardback, £29.59 e-book ISBN 9781138500037 hardback, ISBN 9780429342011 e-book

In 'Gender, Citizenship, and Identity in the Indian Blogosphere: Writing the Everyday', Sumana Kasturi uses blogs as digital artefacts to chart the autobiographical everyday of women bloggers on the internet. By using an approach that allows her to examine the various intersections that the content of a blog post can transcend, this book provides us with newer, nuanced understandings of how women perform in online spaces and make them their own with repeated usage. The book engages with several facets of the online experience and offers us new ways to think about how feminism is performed in cyberspace, how gender is blogged, how the self is portrayed, and how online spaces can be repurposed to form gendered spaces and build communities of support. The blogs studied by the book originate from across geographical and contextual realities, and their examination offers us an understanding of digital diaspora and the Indian diaspora while at the same time questioning existing notions like transnationalism, citizenship, and identity when they are performed in online spaces.

The book has five core chapters that are neatly sandwiched between the customary introduction and conclusion sections. The first two chapters setup the study that the monograph documents, and delve into the exhaustive literature that the author has used as a foundation for the rest of the book. The first chapter examines how the field of new media studies intersects with gendered narratives, as Kasturi builds a framework that can grapple with the fluidity of an ever-changing, post-modern medium like the internet. She draws on the work of scholars like Howard Rheingold, Nick Couldry, Zizi Papacharissi, Juergen Habermas, and Benedict Anderson to argue for the need of digital artefacts to be examined from feminist perspectives and standpoints. As Kasturi makes her argument she juxtaposes the ideas of Judith Butler, Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith, Michelle Rosaldo, and Aparna Rayaprol onto existing work in new media studies to locate a woman's place in human social life - one where she inhabits, produces, and performs in both online and offline spaces simultaneously.

'The activities - 'the things she does' - of a woman are important, even more important are the meanings she makes of them by sharing, commenting, discussing thoughts and feelings in the context of her everyday life.' (4-5)

In the second chapter, the author views blogging as a practice and then situates it in the everyday by drawing on Michel de Certeau. This approach allows her to simultaneously view the blogosphere as a site for examination and as well as a text to analyse, a duality that helps her engage with content, form, and the technological framework that facilitates blogs at the same time. The book analyses nine blogs that were selected and screened from blog aggregators depending on their popularity and the nature of their content. The book then neatly separates the nine blogs into

three groups of three for each of the three broad themes it puts forth. Kasturi uses Herring's WebCA model as a 'loose framework' (31) to analyse the content from the blogs that she studies, but then goes a step further by augmenting the analysis with thick descriptions from her own observations and theoretical interpretations of the blogosphere. This book thus examines the content of the blogs, the bloggers' preferences, practices, and choices along with the technology that enables blogging as a practice.

The book's three analytical chapters (4,5, and 6) offer readers three varied journeys of blogs as platforms. The first analytical frame shows us how blogs serve as places that allow writers to perform their gender, the second showcases the potential for blogs as virtual sites that allow for members of diasporic communities to aggregate, engage and make meanings. The third and final frame studies how when bloggers blog about the mundane from their everyday – like food for instance, their blog posts transform from being mere food-centred narratives into culinary artefacts. Kasturi, while analyzing feminism on the blogosphere, engages with networked feminism and cyberfeminism to provide the reader with an understanding of online feminism in the Indian context. She examines ongoing movements in India like Blank Noise and Why Loiter and their presence in cyberspace to point out that individual bloggers are a key part of the landscape of the various online feminisms. She finds that bloggers use blogs as autobiographical tools to share experiences but articulate said experiences through a feminist lens. She notes:

'While their (individual bloggers') articulations of the everyday are rooted in the particularities of their experience, and rooted in the local 'here and now,' their concerns speak to larger issues faced by women all over the world and draw on feminist scholarship in both direct and indirect ways.' (57–58)

The author uses the above observation to ask the readers to rethink the public/private dichotomy in the context of blogs written by women. She understands blogs as a public document of private life and looks at how this dichotomy is challenged by women bloggers as they write their private to reclaim the public, and in the process challenge dependence on men and their subverted positions in familial structures. Kasturi extends the challenging of the public/private dichotomy in the blogosphere with her analysis of gender-focused blogs and how the topics of discussion on these sites are often either taboo or held within the innermost confines of the private. She understands this constant tussle in this context as one that is open to anyone who is interested to engage and contribute. Kasturi's analysis opens up avenues for conversation that allows for the existence of multiplicities of experience and thus multiple varied feminisms and the need for understanding of the blogosphere as a pluralistic, vibrant site of meaning making.

The book also offers a new understanding of the blogosphere as a site to articulate nostalgia, loss of the homeland, and owing to the platform's communicational capabilities, as a site for the creation of a digital diaspora. A digital diaspora where diasporic communities can share everyday concerns online and, in the process, perform dimensions of the self that they cannot offline. Kasturi notes how members of the Indian diaspora have historically been at the forefront of the blogosphere owing to their early access of Internet technologies and unique professional skillsets. Here the author chooses blogs that address the immigrant experience and unravels the various decisions that bloggers make with regards to divulging their locations and positionalities. This chapter uses blogs as entry points to grapple with the

understanding of citizenship as a construct by looking at how people craft narratives of themselves around their paperwork, passports, and immigration statuses. By analysing content that looks at how at times requisite documentation and bureaucratic measures inhibit or prevent bloggers from visiting places they hail from or identify with, this chapter raises pertinent questions on the way citizenship needs to be understood and re-worked for a post-modern frame (blogs and the internet). The author complicates the idea of location and home, by looking at the multiplicity of spaces that diasporic blog writers would inhabit in these contexts, she observes:

'So, while these bloggers, like other bloggers are simultaneously straddling the online and offline spaces, they are also straddling intercontinental, intercultural spaces. They may perhaps be pledging allegiance simultaneously to different nation-states, at different levels and in different aspects of their lives. But it is this multiplicity of experience, and this simultaneous juggling of cultures, societies, and nationalities that exemplifies the transnational.' (105)

The book's final chapter helps us understand how blogging about food reconfigures the blogosphere and thus begins the intersection between virtual spaces and food. This intersection is viewed by the author as a better indicator of contemporary culinary cultures than traditional cookbooks. Kasturi uses food and practices surrounding its preparation and consumption to ask pertinent questions on identity, origin, class, and understandings of the self. The chapter on food and culinary practices neatly ties up the book as all of it is situated in the bloggers' every day and the homage to de Certeau's work on food cultures is almost difficult to ignore. The entire project is well summed up when the author uses the final set of blogs to chart both the Indian foodscape and the blogosphere to say:


'In a country where regional and caste affiliations can often be identified by name, the blogosphere allows the blogger, should she wish it, to shed such affiliations. While some bloggers are up front about caste and region, others play down the specifics of caste, yet provide clear markers regarding other affiliations.' (133)

It is important to understand the standpoint of the author to appreciate the value of this work and Kasturi's experiences as a woman, an Indian scholar who has spent time away from the homeland help her examine the sections on diaspora considerably. The book lucidly interweaves theory, data, and analysis to initiate key conversations about the Indian Blogosphere. Readers of *Gender, Place & Culture* may find the book to be relevant to a high degree as it offers unique insights on gender (everyday feminisms), place (the blogosphere and digital diasporas) and culture (culinary practices). The book has its limitations though as blogs have not been a site worthy of academic inquiry in the last decade (especially in New Media Studies) with the advent of social media and other ICT technologies that are capable of a multitude of online interactions and varied dimensions for performativity of the self. Another limitation of the book would be the small number of blogs that were analysed. The three blogs per each analytical theme structure that the book follows seems like a number on the lower side and while, the thick descriptions and in-depth analyses offer some very rich data, a few more blogs should have helped arrive at a more holistic view of the Blogosphere. However, this work is of considerable value in the Indian context as the country's populace increasingly embraces the ubiquitous use of ICT technologies. For readers from an international context this work is almost akin to Carolyn Marvin's understanding of old technologies as new (Marvin 1988)

as Kasturi's work allows us to look back at blogs and examine them from the vantage point of having studied more technologically equipped platforms and ask pertinent questions of an older form and its users. Sometimes we need to look back to understand what to do next and this book offers us interesting new ways to chart newer practices of archiving one's everyday like vlogging and livestreaming.

## References

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Aditya Deshbandhu  
Independent Researcher, Hyderabad 500019, India  
 [aditya.deshbandhu@gmail.com](mailto:aditya.deshbandhu@gmail.com)

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