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Book Review: "Neoliberalization" as Betrayal: State, Feminism, and a Women's Education Program in India

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"Neoliberalization" as Betrayal: State, Feminism, and a Women's Education Program in India

Shubhra Sharma, 2011, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 288 pp., US$85.00 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Haigen Huang[1]

Empowerment is one of the key concepts/techniques of feminism and feminists have endeavored to improve women's lives globally. In many countries, feminists have been involved in a variety of programs with a purpose of empowering women who are disadvantaged in their societies. Governments of many countries take these initiatives as a way of promoting social and economic development, and the converged interest has led to cooperation between feminists and bureaucrats in implementing the programs. However, when bureaucrats and feminists work together, those programs oftentimes run astray of feminists' agenda of empowering women. Sharma's ethnography, *"Neoliberalization" as Betrayal: State, Feminism, and a Women's Education Program in India*, discusses what happens and why when bureaucrats and feminists cooperate to operate the Mahila Samakhya Program (MS), a government-run educational program for women's equality and empowerment in India. Sharma goes in-depth to explore the complexity and dilemma that feminists encountered when they were engaged in the MS.

The book includes six chapters. Chapter One gives an introduction of the program structure and the three levels of intervention and how Sharma got access to the program; Chapter Two provides a comprehensive examination of Sharma's positionality of conducting the ethnography, a woman who grew up in India and worked for the MS returning to India from the U.S. to do fieldwork; Chapter Three discusses how bureaucrats engaged in reinventing the MS and how the neoliberalism as a political rationality put the program "in line with contemporary political ideologies"(p.16); Chapter Four explores the tension between feminism and government; Chapter Five examines how feminists' expertise (empathy, movement, and negotiation) while producing desired effects for the MS also led to corruption in the program hierarchy; Chapter Six examines how empowerment, as a feminist technique, ends up with betrayal of feminist politics. Sharma proposes that "listening" should be a technique employed by feminists in order to develop new techniques/vocabularies for the future.

The book embraces a feminist theoretical stance by examining how feminist assumptions, in particular empowerment, stray from feminism under the neoliberal political environment in India. For example, feminists were hired as consultants by the government in the MS and this type of hiring institutionalized feminism, which made feminists act more as "middlemen" of government rather than "middlemen" for women. Instead of taking the program trainings as a means to an end for empowering women (a purpose of feminist experts) bureaucrats of the MS made training to be the end and produced the effect of women's dependency on the program. Sharma raises critical questions for feminists to rethink while applying feminism to empower women in India. Specifically, how do feminists adopt different strategies to maintain the essence of feminism in different cultural and political contexts? If empowerment is not empowering, what new techniques may feminists develop to emancipate women?

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The study is well designed and executed. With a purpose of uncovering the MS from its beginning to the end, exploring the uneasiness between bureaucrats and feminist experts, and showing the dilemma that Indian feminists encountered, Sharma adopts ethnography as the research method. The ethnographic approach allows her to collect data from various resources, including bureaucrats who supervised the MS, feminist consultants, coordinators, low-caste women from villages, meetings and conferences, and archive files. The site is Deli, Jaipur and the Banda district of Uttar Pradesh. She "interviewed the senior-level government bureaucrat who is credited with the idea of MS, and a feminist academic whose help the government bureaucrat enlisted to formulate the MS program" (p.39), two program coordinators in Banda, and 12 low-caste women; she also conducted numerous field observations and archive research.

The argument that neoliberalization is a betrayal of feminism is well supported by rich data. Feminists' narratives about the program are presented in such a way that their voices are heard. Strategies the government adopted and institutionalized feminists for its political agenda, feminists' frustration while cooperating with bureaucrats, and experiences of low-caste women while participating in the training are all well fleshed out.

My critique of the study only includes two aspects. First, it is unclear whether the betrayal is due to neoliberalization or bureaucracy. Could the betrayal be a reflection of power relation between the bureaucrats and feminists? Could neoliberalization be understood as a strategy that the government exerts its control and surveillance over people, including feminist experts and low-caste women? If so, the MS betrayal of feminism may just mirror an imbalanced power relation between the government and feminist experts instead of betrayal by neoliberalization. Second, there is a lack of discussion about how neoliberalism in India is practiced differently than in other countries. The initial rise of neoliberalism was related to the neoliberal regime in Britain and the United States in the late 1970. Does neoliberalism bear the same meaning as it does in America when it is adopted by the Indian government?