

Book Review

Ascetics as Activists: Saffron Women of Hindu Nationalism

by

Koushiki Dasgupta

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Book Reviewed by Dr. Sudhir Singh#

Koushiki Dasgupta's 'Ascetics as Activists: Saffron Women of Hindu Nationalism' presents a thought-provoking exploration into the multifaceted roles of female ascetics, or sadhvis, within the right-wing Hindu nationalist discourse in India. Published by Bloomsbury Academic in June 2025. This work delves deeply into the complexities of female asceticism and its entanglement with Hindu nationalist ideology. Dasgupta challenges traditional perceptions that often portray these women solely as passive spiritual figures. Instead, she highlights their active engagement in political activism, portraying them as dynamic agents who significantly influence contemporary Hindu politics. The book is organized into six well-structured chapters, each addressing different dimensions of sadhvis' involvement in Hindu nationalism. Key themes include Gender and Political Identity, Asceticism and Activism, and the intersectionality of caste, gender, and religion in the lives of these ascetics. Dasgupta meticulously examines how sadhvis construct their political identities, frequently adopting roles that defy conventional gender norms. By embracing ideals of virtuous motherhood—often celebrated in Hindu culture—alongside the concept of female warriorhood, they assert an alternative form of authority in both the public and private spheres. In doing so, they redefine the feminine space within the predominantly male-dominated Hindutva movement, which has historically sidelined women's contributions.

The book intricately explores the duality of asceticism and activism in the lives of sadhvis. While asceticism has traditionally emphasized

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renunciation and withdrawal from worldly life, these women cleverly integrate activism into their spiritual practices, challenging the perceived divide between spiritual detachment and political engagement. Dasgupta's analysis sheds light on how sadhvis navigate this complex terrain, often finding themselves at the crossroads of spiritual and political realms. In summary, 'Ascetics as Activists' offers a rich and nuanced examination of the roles played by female sadhvis, providing vital insights into their spiritual endeavors, political involvement, and the challenges they face within the Hindutva framework. This book is not only a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse on gender, religion, and politics in contemporary India but also serves as an essential resource for anyone interested in understanding the complexities and intersections of these themes in South Asia. The book also addresses the intriguing duality of asceticism and activism in the lives of sadhvis. While asceticism typically emphasizes renunciation, these women intertwine their spiritual pursuits with political engagement, challenging the conventional divide between spiritual detachment and active involvement in societal issues.

Overall, Dasgupta provides a nuanced analysis of sadhvis, offering valuable insights into their spiritual practices, political actions, and the obstacles they encounter within the Hindutva framework. The book maintains an analytical tone, but at times lacks a robust critique of the communal violence and exclusionary rhetoric associated with the political ideology the sadhvis espouse.

This book is a compelling and timely contribution that intricately weaves together various disciplinary perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of gendered political religiosity in India. This work opens up new avenues for research across fields, particularly in exploring how non-secular forms of female agency challenge established liberal, feminist, and secular frameworks. It is recommended for researchers in political science, feminist theory, South Asian studies, anthropology, and religious studies.

Needless to say, that this book will enrich the literature on religiosity in a perspective which were not much in the debate in India and also in other corners of the globe. Overall, this book will be relevant for all shed of researchers who pursues their research on any related themes including religiosity.

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